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A BRILLIANT WOMAN

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BY

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"THE MARCH VIOLET," "SARA," "LOVE IN A GERMAN VILLAGE,"

"A DUTCH COUSIN," ETC., ETC.

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A BRILLIANT WOMAN.

CHAPTER I.

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS.

PERPLEXITY, anxiety, and a surprise she could not conceal, chased each other alternately over the face of a maiden lady as she read a letter she had just received.

She was sitting at breakfast in a delightful, cheerful, sunny breakfast-room. The sunrays played upon brilliant silver, exquisitely fine linen, and all those small dainties which, by reason of their minuteness and of the slender nourishment they afford, proclaim the absence of the carnivorous animal—man.

Two bantam's eggs, a little lettuce, some radishes, fruit, and various hot cakes were all arranged within her reach. She had poured out her tea and had then noticed one letter on the top of her other letters, conspicuously challenging her attention, and she read it. The tea-urn steamed and her tea cooled, but she sat with the utmost disregard of both these things. She was pale, a little faded, and elderly, but her eyes were still fine, and her hands were white and beautifully shaped.

She let her eyes wander over the well-kept lawn, the sunlight playing through the huge branches of some fine cedars, and with a start turned to her breakfast, barely touched it, and re-read her letter.

The lady, Miss Burlington, was the aunt of Mr. Cyril Burlington, a large landed proprietor on the borders of Worcestershire. He was a man of thirty-six and she had brought him up entirely, been his most loving guardian, cared for his welfare as a schoolboy, sent him to travel in his youth, and looked after

his property till he was old enough to look after it himself.

His father had been killed out hunting when he was a little boy in petticoats, and his mother had not long survived the loss of the husband she idolized. From the time Cyril came of age Miss Burlington had urged him to marry, which was a great mistake, since men have a way of arranging these matters for themselves, and very often become adverse to anything pressed upon them.

But she was anxious to see him happily married. She felt deeply the immense wickedness of man, especially as set forth in the papers; and she considered that no girl in her proper senses—no very nice girl—would refuse him. He wanted no fortune with his wife, as he was very rich. He was well born, and did not care for connection. This gave his choice much freedom and a large area.

The letter which disturbed her was not alarming. It was unexpected, and announced his engagement

to a young lady; but there was something negative, an absence of the overflowing delight Miss Burlington was romantic enough to expect on such an occasion. There was also a postscript. Unlike the usual letter of a man, it contained matter for thought. "She is a very brilliant creature." What did this mean? That other qualities were wanting? She had to write, of course, at once to the darling of her heart. She knew that she must feel differently before writing and she went out on the lawn. Cyril was grave, somewhat sedate, as a man is apt to be with the shadow of two graves lying over his childhood. He was full of talent, which was generally a surprise to people who did not know him well, and who considered him dull on slight acquaintance. Even upon subjects he had thoroughly studied he was reticent of speech. Miss Burlington, knowing how well he might have answered, argued, and even convinced people, reproached him at times with his silence. But he laughed

off her rebukes. "There are so many people who can talk, and who like to talk," he would answer. "I like silence best."

Miss Burlington was roused from vexed questions to which she could bring no quite satisfactory answers, by the reproachful gaze of the elderly butler, who met her as she was coming back. "I was afraid something had happened, ma'am. You never rang, and the tea-urn has boiled over."

Miss Burlington was annoyed. Certainly, Marsham was making unnecessary fuss. Both footmen had been called in; everything lifted off the table; she was made to feel that she had given a great deal of trouble. Marsham spared her nothing.

Then Mrs. Butt, who was short in her temper, but such an excellent housekeeper, and so first-rate a cook, came bristling to the door for delayed orders; Miss Burlington saw that she must at once put herself in the right with her, or she would have still greater discomfort to put up with.

"Before arranging about the dinner, Mrs. Butt, I wish to tell you some news I have just received. My nephew, Mr. Burlington, wishes it announced."

"I was afraid you had received bad news, ma'am," said Mrs. Butt, putting on her most melancholy expression and preparing—if necessary—to go to the very verge of tears.

"Oh, dear, no! Not bad news. I was surprised; it is perhaps a little unexpected; Mr. Burlington is going to be married."

"Dear me, ma'am, I'm sure I wish you both joy! Do you know the young lady, Miss Burlington?"

"I have never seen her. But we can feel sure that she is all Mr. Burlington can wish for him, since he has chosen her."

"Of course, ma'am. Is she a titled lady, ma'am?"

"No; Miss Maria Kingson."

"Well, ma'am, though a duke's daughter isn't too good for master, she'll may be make up for it. Am I to tell the household or wait for further orders?"

"You can tell everyone. Tell Marsham first; and say I would have told him myself, but as the footmen were there I could not do so." Miss Burlington knew that this was an excellent return for the undue fuss Marsham had made.

Mrs. Butt said a great many sensible things, and was inclined to be a little tearful, but at the same time was really sympathetic and most deeply interested.

Difficulties of any kind were that morning arranged with great celerity. She was dying to go and tell Marsham, (who would be provoked at being second and not first to hear so important an event,) and very soon retired. Miss Burlington went again under the cedar trees; the impending change was a very great one for her. To uproot a lady of over sixty from the home she has had for more than forty years was no light thing for her. She loved the beautiful place and the gardens with an appreciation time had increased and not lessened; the peeps

through the great lime tree avenue of the blue hills of Malvern in the far distance; the bustling, insignificant charming trout stream, by whose murmurs she went to sleep, and whose career she could follow through the valley in the shape of a silver thread; the beech-wood, where on hot days it was always cool and pleasant, and on cold days always sheltered; then the flowering shrubs and rose trees. She trusted Cyril's wife would love these things. Perhaps, as a "brilliant creature," she would not care for them.

Then Miss Burlington, shocked to find herself drifting into a feeling akin to antagonism towards the future Mrs. Burlington, turned rapidly to the house and dashed off a letter of warmest good wishes and congratulations to her nephew.

She went out driving that afternoon. She had long made up her mind that an old manor house, which stood partly inside partly outside the park, and which was considered too much in the grounds

to be let to strangers, would be a pleasant home for her when,—and if,—Cyril married; and she went there now. To reach it driving you had to go down the west avenue, along a road, and then up a lane; but there was a short cut through the grounds if wanted. A curious doubt arose in her mind now as to whether that shorter way would ever be put into requisition by her new niece.

The manor house was in excellen repair. It was a quaint pretty place, with a wide-flagged pavement up to the door and some fine trees round it. At the back a sunny flower garden, the abode of bees, whose cheerful humming made an important noise in the dead stillness now. It was all well kept up. For Miss Burlington's had been a wise rule, and no part of the large property had been neglected. When her nephew succeeded he had found order everywhere, and an organisation so perfect that no one particular hand was required to keep it up. It sometimes happens that things are in excellent order

or the reverse by reason of the presence or absence of one man upon whom the whole machinery depends, as a watch does upon its mainspring. But this was not the case here.

Wandering through the garden thoughtfully, Miss Burlington's mind arranged everything—how and when she would come here. She felt a little sad when she had so settled everything; and then one of those trifles that influence us all swept regret upon one side. Down a broad grass walk she had stepped, and all at once she saw something she had for many years entirely forgotten. Two old-fashioned delicious Celestine rose bushes covered with their exquisite bloom nodded a welcome to her; all at once she remembered how she and her sister had planted them, and how they had talked together of the joy they would be to them when Cyril married, and they two lived together here. He was marrying now, and she would come here alone. Miss Burlington's heart swelled as she thought of that

day. She gathered some of the roses tenderly, and returned home with softer and kinder thoughts of Cyril's intended marriage—softened by this remembrance. His wife might be very brilliant, but no one could deprive her of the memories which she had, and which were so sweet to her. The future she knew nothing about, but the past was hers.

CHAPTER II.

AUNT AND NEPHEW.

THE first recognition of a difference in feeling between two people who have hitherto been one in thought—or as nearly so as it is given to human beings to be—gives something of a shock and a constraint, which is always painful, because it is not only new, but also what has hitherto been supposed to be impossible. Miss Burlington had written affectionately to her nephew, but he had missed something. She was too candid a person not to give the impress of her mind in her letters. When she reflected upon the great event—which

was generally all day long—she found herself recurring to that expression which had so disturbed her. Would Cyril have laid stress upon the brilliancy of his affianced wife if he could have named other quality more solid—more desirable. It is one of the comforting circumstances of life that when we pen a letter we do not know how, when, and where it may be read.

Cyril Burlington read his aunt's letter in the well-furnished library of Mr. Kingson's house. Maria was an orphan, and had been brought up by this uncle and his wife. Maria was putting some finishing touches to the arrangement of some flowers, and made a very effective picture, flashing here and there. There were picturesque surroundings—old oak, leather, paper heavily touched with gold, very high windows with stained glass, and one wide frame open very high up, which permitted the sunrays to slant down upon Maria's hair, which had a fine tinge of ruddy gold through it, and on her complexion, which was exquisite.

She had turned back her sleeves, with their pretty lace ruffles, and her hands were white, and took graceful attitudes, which even pretty hands do not always do. She had a large loose apron on, which enhanced the slenderness of her waist, and the glowing colours of roses and orchids were all around her. Her manner of arranging the flowers struck him as original. He had often seen his aunt arrange the flowers at home. She had all the necessary vases full of water in front of her upon a huge tray, where the flowers reposed. She put in the flowers with some taste, and then they went back to their established corners. But that was methodical, even prosaic, and it was not Miss Kingson's way. She had the different vases and glasses standing about the room where she intended them to remain, and she moved about with a crimson or a white rose, or stood back to see the effect with her head at that feminine angle which is a woman's way of trying to see things from an impartial and

original point of view. As she took away one, and put in another flower, her movements were quick if a little stately; and the effect she produced justified the trouble she took. Yellow brought a dim corner into prominence, tall grass broke a harsh line, and the finest orchids reigned alone in long Venetian glasses, with the dark oak behind them to show them off.

But even the prettiest picture exhausts epithets of admiration after a time; and, having been called upon to express it at least twenty times, Mr. Burlington began to find this out, and his answers became less satisfactory to her. Indeed, he was thinking of other things.

Maria looked at him for a moment or two, then she said, quite good temperedly, "I see, flowers bore you; you do not care for them; it was stupid bringing you in here."

He was much surprised, and raised his eyes to hers in protest. "I have tried to show my appreciation

of the flowers, and your way of arranging them," he said, with his grave smile. "I am afraid my efforts have fallen short—I am not a very good hand at expressing myself, I know."

"Oh, if it was an effort Shall we ride now? Yes, I will go and get ready."

She had gone before he rose. She was very even tempered, and that is an invaluable blessing, but Mr. Burlington had somehow been put in the wrong and forgiven, more by her manner than by her words, and he did not like it. He re-read his aunt's letter. He was, of course, "in love," but his aunt had always been a very real mother to him, and he made up his mind that he ought to go down and see her. Maria made another very pretty picture on horseback. She had a well-trained horse, and its size and make were exactly what they ought to have been, for she was tall and sat high, which tall women often do not do, and she sat well, and attracted much admiration. Mr. Burlington rode

like all country gentlemen who have ridden often to hounds, and he gave his appearance no thought. The two rode alone down the Row, but soon were joined first by one and then by another till the party developed into a cavalcade. Maria had to answer first one and then another; she was not altogether sorry her lover should see that she was in great request, though she was too well trained, too well bred, to show off.

But, considering that she was engaged to Mr. Burlington, and he saw nothing of her, he thought that riding with her there was not quite the joy it might have been. And the "Row" bored him horribly, as it does all good riders who have time to go elsewhere—a fact which satisfactorily accounts for the very few men to be seen there, who can ride at all. They went in to luncheon, Cyril more silent than usual, Maria in brilliant spirits, and then he told her of his plans.

She was interested, sent his aunt many kind

messages, advised him to make various arrangements, and was full of charming solicitude about his journey. He left her with the sense of her unchanging sweetness of temper full upon him; and he regretted having felt so distinctly cross that morning.

It was nice of her not to have noticed it, and yet—so unreasonable is man—he fancied it would have been a greater proof of affection if she had done so.

On his way down to his house he naturally thought a good deal about her, especially at first. He was amazed to find that, though he was much in love, his mind was capable of criticising her, which was not what should be. A sense of her dazzling presence, her brilliant smile, the atmosphere that surrounded her, had thrown a glamour over every word and action. Now that he was away from all these things he was struck by her various idiosyncrasies, and some of these he was not sure that he did admire. She evaded every argument skillfully, and always with a charming smile; but she

invariably took her own way afterwards, and, what was more, she always got him to take her way also.

Would this be the rule of their future lives? Was she one of those women who dominate by sheer silent perseverance and obstinate determination. The thought made him uncomfortable, chiefly because he considered it ungenerous to stand in judgment upon her when she was all unconscious of it; and he recalled her gentleness, her winning ways, and her affection for himself with a pang of something like remorse. He had not been her only admirer or the one most highly placed, judged by any standard that he knew; and she had chosen him.

If she did not love him heartily, what reason could be assigned for a preference that had much flattered him? He was not handsome, nor brilliant, and his intellectual gifts were precisely those that did not come to the surface in society, and would hardly be appreciated by youth and the average feminine mind.

He had great fluency in foreign tongues and a wide acquaintance with foreign literature, but his special talent was a power of arranging and assembling facts, telling on a given point, so clearly in his own mind that he could temperately and cleverly place them convincingly before others, in terse, well-chosen words. Eloquence carries away for a time, but there is an eloquence in which choice diction and a flow of happily chosen similes convince for the moment, but when the charm of the voice is gone words remain only. Cyril's somewhat untrained voice cast no glamour and bewitched no ears, but he had the art of convincing.

What he said was the result of thought and mature judgment; he spoke earnestly, and from his heart, and reached the hearts of others, as an earnest speaker usually does. Before he had disentangled his somewhat bewildered ideas on the subject of his fiancée, he found himself at the station, and met his aunt's pleasant face and smile of wel-

come with great satisfaction. She was driving herself, and had one outrider, and this bespoke confidence, as she was rather a timid whip and preferred being driven, but when confidential conversation was in prospect she disliked servants in front or behind. Her pony had been giving trouble, resenting the long waiting with no distractions to speak of, and she was flushed as she welcomed Cyril, with a full recognition of altered circumstances now he was an engaged man.

The first warm, hearty greeting over, the expected confidences did not come as soon nor as fast as might have been expected.

Miss Burlington glanced once or twice at her nephew. Finally she said, "I am longing to know all about your engagement, my boy."

He laughed a little, but pleasantly. "I am glad you have broken the ice. I shall like talking to you about it."

As he spoke came a swift recollection that loyalty

to his intended, prevented his touching upon any misgiving. Misgiving! The thought rather startled him.

Surely it was not so much *that* as a slight feeling of discomfort, because she had in some way disturbed his usual quiet complacency that day?

"You know without my saying it, how intensely anxious I am for your happiness. It is, of course, a great change and a serious matter."

"It is a very serious matter. She, Maria, is very good and very beautiful."

"But it was not her beauty that first attracted you?"

"Oh, no! I do not know how it began. But I think it wonderful she should have said yes. She has so many others, and I am a dull fellow, you know, and plain."

"You are not plain; and even if you were, plain men are never at a disadvantage."

"Ah! but to judge fairly there must be compari-

son; and Maria is one of the most brilliant girls I ever saw. She puts every one somehow into the shade."

"That is in your eyes natural enough," said Miss Burlington, who was in a measure consoled, but who still missed that loverlike tone she expected.

"You lay great stress upon her brilliancy," she said, after a moment's silence.

"There is no other word that expresses it so well. She is different from other girls. But I trust you will see her soon. We hope to be married next month: and you, dear auntie, must be there," he added affectionately.

"Of course, my dear. I had no idea you were to be married so soon."

"There is nothing to wait for."

As the house was reached by this time, there was no time for more. Cyril went to get ready for dinner; but when he was alone in his room he stood long looking out upon the fresh beauty

of the undulating park and the deep shadows lying on the grass under the trees. Soon he would stand with her beside him, and all his life and her life they would be together. He pictured her in the house brightening it up, and adding cheerfulness to its somewhat grave routine. Aunt Anne would always, of course, be there, the quiet, reposeful, central figure of his childhood, and this other figure would bring sunshine. . . .

He started to find how quickly the time had passed, and he dressed fast, leaving his room as the voice of the deep-toned gong was ringing and vibrating through the house.

He thoroughly enjoyed his dinner. The absence of any exertion was so delightful to him. He was conscious of the comfort given him, by being surrounded by those who knew his ways. His prolonged absence had made him sensible of the difference between the careless service of those who were indifferent to his likes and dislikes, and those

whose service was affectionate, and who were not indifferent.

"It is good to be at home," he said, when his aunt and he sat once again alone. "And you have a knack of making everything so easy. I am afraid I am selfish and love my home comforts too much. I miss them when I am away."

"Loving home is not selfishness. I am sure my successor will make your home quite as home-like, and give you increased interest in it. She will brighten it up for you. I think, dear, you and I alone here are too sober."

"Your successor, auntie! Ah, I see. Yes, I suppose my wife will sit at the head of the table."

"My boy! You do not judge me so unwise as to remain a third with you and with her."

Cyril Burlington looked at her in genuine surprise. "What do you mean? What plot have you been hatching?"

"I have been hatching no plot. It was always

understood. I have always arranged to live at the Manor House when you married."

"At the Manor House?"

"It is best. In your absence I have been getting it ready. You have no idea how pretty and how cosy it looks. I want you to go and see it with me; I know you will like it."

"I shall not like it at all. Auntie, do you think this necessary?" His voice was a little uncertain. He was deeply moved, and much distressed. Never for one moment had this crossed his mind. And he reflected that he ought to have known and foreseen it. Now, he had all at once to reconcile himself to this further change. The place, without his aunt's sweet, familiar face, would be very different to him. He could not think of it as home without her, and he said so. "It will hardly feel like home without you."

"Just at first it may seem strange, dearest, but the Manor House is such a little distance; ten

minutes only. I shall be at hand to meddle and interfere, and give advice, and make myself generally disagreeable," she said, full of the coming change to herself—the uprooting of all her habits—and anxious to make light of it all, and to give a less doleful tone to the whole thing.

He rose abruptly, and took up the favourite masculine attitude before the fire, from which vantage point it seems easier to say what requires an effort to say.

"I may think you in the right," he said, while he still felt acutely the impending separation; "but I must have time to try to reconcile myself to it all. It is a new idea to me. When we have talked of this place, Maria and I, we have always talked of you and of your being here."

"It is very sweet of her, but it is best. Why, if I were your real mother, I should go all the same. Young lives had better begin alone. It is wisest and safest."

"And the servants?"

"I have said nothing, done nothing. It is for you—for her to decide."

"They must remain."

"I advise you to decide nothing without her. It would not be fair towards her. Write to her, and ask her frankly what she wishes."

"Perhaps you are right."

"You can do so better now than at any other time, because when I move there are one or two who might go with me. And then you can pension those who have been here for a great many years, and are too old to seek other places."

Cyril Burlington began to realise that his marriage would bring many changes besides those he had anticipated.

The evening passed happily and quietly, and nothing more was said as he sauntered under the big trees with his aunt, his cigar just kept alight by an occasional attention to it. The wonderful

stillness and hush of a place, isolated by its big park from other human habitations, fell upon them both, and when they said "Good night," there was a lingering tenderness in his manner which the elderly lady felt to imply much. How much, she did not know! For Cyril was asking himself whether the affection he had won would make up for all he was giving up, especially his aunt's companionship. Decidedly, he was not altogether as much in love as he had thought.

CHAPTER III.

GENERAL SURPRISE.

IF Miss Anne Burlington was perturbed in spirit, the acquaintances and *soi-disant* friends of Miss Maria Kingson were immensely surprised. Such a brilliant girl! Such a dull man! All these various people were open-mouthed, and talked a good deal—flatteringly to her face, not quite so flatteringly behind her back. He was credited with a huge fortune at one moment, and at the next believed to have next to nothing. His place swelled to the dimensions of a palace at one time, and dwindled to the smallest villa all in a breath. In the absence

of an exciting newspaper topic, the engagement was a good deal more discussed than would have otherwise been the case, and it lasted as a subject of conversation quite a week. Maria was congratulated, and received the congratulations with a certain sense of triumph. The surprise expressed was, to her, always on the score of her consent, and this gave her importance. It implied that she had the world to choose from, and her experience was that this was not her case. She had been much admired, but had not been equally loved, lacking that indefinable charm which impels affection, and which is oftenest found in girls neither brilliant nor beautiful. She was amused by all she was told, and, besides being flattered, was excited.

"He is silent," she answered, frankly; "but I am sure I can get him to talk, and I like him!"

"So I suppose," would an admiring friend rejoin, "but that is what we all think so odd. You are brilliant, you know; you are very brilliant. We

always fancied you would make such a wonderful marriage!"

"No one can call this a bad marriage!"

"Not in any sense: a fine place and—money; but one somehow expected a Member of Parliament, if not a Cabinet Minister to be your fate. You are one of the few women who could have a salon, and"

"Is there any reason why Mr. Burlington should not be a Member of Parliament?"

"None, of course. He would be a very silent member."

"Therefore the more appreciated. Votes are wanted more than speeches."

This answer was generally conclusive. But there was a certain relation of hers who was a woman of the world and not a worldly woman, who was anxious to put the future in a more just manner to her. It jarred not a little upon her to hear the open way in which Maria expressed her intention

of "managing" Mr. Burlington—of whom she herself had a very high opinion. "I do not think you quite understand Mr. Burlington, my dear. His is not a character that will brook management."

"My dear cousin! He will know nothing about it. I mean to make him do always and at all times exactly what I wish without his being aware of it. It is one of the attractions. I intend pushing him into action—rousing his ambition—you will see. Of course, to succeed in anything one must know and understand everything. But I am not afraid; I do not think the task quite beyond me." Then the cousin said no more.

"You will have plenty to do," said a girl friend who clung in a picturesque attitude round her. She generally had a girl worshipper beside her, and liked it. She was attractive to her own sex, and was never better pleased than when they showed their devotion very openly.

"I mean to do it," she answered seriously. "Up

till now I do not consider Mr. Burlington has really lived. He has vegetated with a very old aunt in the country. He wants life—he wants light and colour in his life. He will never be a brilliant man, but he will be a different being in a few months.”

This attitude towards her intended husband never varied. The aunt in whose house Maria had always lived could have explained a good deal that puzzled the world, had she so chosen. In the history of ill-assorted or unhappy marriages, it is always a fact that their origin can be traced to interference on the part of injudicious friends, certainly in nine cases out of ten.

Mrs. Kingson's greatest wish had been to see Maria married, and well married. It had been a disappointment to her to find that three or four seasons had passed, and the girl so generally admired had never had her opportunity. With a daughter of her own (now sixteen) she wanted so much to see Maria comfortably disposed of, that she was pushed into active

measures she considered justifiable. She therefore impressed upon both, in strictest confidence, that the other was much in love. Mr. Burlington, who had admired Miss Kingson very much (especially for those brilliant qualities he was conscious of being deficient in), was much touched and immensely flattered to be assured by one who must know(?) that this brilliant being loved him, while with Maria quite a different argument was brought forward.

“Mr. Burlington is in love with you, Maria; but, my dear child! do not build any hopes upon this. He is not a marrying man; and my belief is that he is one of the cautious men who never will risk a refusal. I suspect he will never marry! He admires you, and, without knowing it, is in love with you; but, matrimony... No, my child, he is out of your reach, and out of the reach of every other woman.”

“Perhaps,” said Maria, flushing. But the words roused her ambition. To prove her aunt wrong, to

achieve a triumph, became an object with her. In her softened manner, her slightly lowered voice, the way she appealed to him, Mr. Burlington read complete confirmation of Mrs. Kingson's confidences. He proposed, and both were absolutely ignorant of the pressure brought to bear upon an important, an all-important, step involving the happiness or misery of two lives. They were placed in a false position by this injudicious interference, and the few weeks of their engagement were peculiar. Mr. Burlington did not show all the rapture Maria had expected. But she explained it as being characteristic of a very reserved man; and, while she was always very charming, she seemed to Mr. Burlington to be more intent upon exacting admiration from him than showing the violent affection she was supposed to have conceived for him.

The situations might sometimes have been comical had they not been pathetic. Then when those explanations—inevitable in such cases—had taken

place between Mr. Burlington and Mr. Kingson, when settlements, etc., came in question, something had been told the lover which had appealed to all his most generous sentiments, and a profound compassion had increased his affection. All the same, when Mr. Kingson openly acknowledged to him that he was chivalric and very generous; he knew very well that he was both; and the fact of knowing a very mortifying secret of which Maria knew nothing at all made him lenient towards her, and, by appealing to the highest part of his nature, increased his affection for his fiancée by bringing that element of pity into play which is akin to love.

Upon her side, with that profound belief in his devotion and her own powers—a belief in herself engendered by being prettier, brighter, and more free from shyness than any of her immediate surroundings—her vanity, fostered by the admiration and adulation of schoolgirls, who considered her as

something peculiarly charming, Maria accepted Mr. Burlington with the serious determination of bringing him out—of making something of him.

“He wants,” she said to herself, reflectively, “the light touch of a woman’s spirit. He is devoted to me. It shall be my task to make a man of him!” Poor Mr. Burlington!

She was a little disappointed to find that he did not apparently appreciate her efforts; but then he was evidently unaware of his own deficiencies and ignorant of her accomplishments, which, she considered, surpassed those of other girls, always taking her relations as a standard.

“Mr. Burlington, not knowing this superiority, is not appreciative,” she thought again, weighing him in the balance, and finding him wanting.

It will be seen that Mr. Burlington had a good deal to learn about his future wife. Most men have. When their plans were discussed he told her of his aunt and of all her tender care of his youth; of the

sorrow surrounding his home in those early days, and of the place itself.

"Perhaps you may like to alter something," he said, with a sigh of regret; "I cannot expect you to like things exactly as I do."

"We shall see," she said, kindly. "But rococo things have a charm, and I like very old people."

"My aunt is not very old."

"No? And yet she brought you up."

"She is about sixty, young and active for her age."

"Ah."

"I wanted to consult you about several things," he said, seeing his opportunity; "and I wanted to tell you a good deal about the place."

"I am listening with both my ears and all my intelligence," she answered, gaily, taking up some very fine embroidery, and applying herself to the congenial task of laying out the lovely coloured silks before her.

"I had hoped—I knew you would also have

wished—that my aunt had remained with us,” he began, hoping for an expression of opinion to this effect.

“And she has gone?”

“She is going. I feel her departure more than I can say, and I am sure if you had met she would have seen at once that her scruples about staying on with us were groundless.”

“As you dislike her going, I am sorry she is going to take that step,” answered Maria, carefully matching two shades of brown.

“Then you do not enter into my feeling about it?” he said, with gravity.

“I quite enter into your feeling. But I think she is wise. We agreed always to speak the truth to each other, so I may tell you my own feeling.”

“We did. But you like old people?”

“Really old people, yes. But this aunt you say is not very old, and she might interfere, and, if I may speak the real truth, I think it would have

been a bore." said Maria, with much composure.

Mr. Burlington wished the truth to be rule between them, but he had not expected the truth to be quite so brutal. There was, he thought, a want of kind feeling in this view of the case. "Ah!" said Maria, laughing the spontaneous laugh which he had generally fancied so attractive, but which he did not admire at this moment, "put to the test, the truth does not please you!"

Cyril struggled against his feeling of annoyance and tried to speak good-temperedly. "I wish for the truth and only the truth. I am vexed that this should be your feeling on the subject. My aunt is very dear to me; I should be an ungrateful animal if it were otherwise... I love her so much and know her cleverness and pleasantness so well, that the idea of her boring you or anyone else is simply absurd."

"But as a perpetual third, my dear good Cyril do you not see that she would be distinctly matter

in a wrong place? However, never mind, if speaking the truth offends and irritates you so much, let us leave it alone." She held her soft white hand out towards him in token of amity. "This is not encouraging," he said, trying to shake off his vexed and hurt impression, "and I have really many things to consult you about."

Maria laid aside her work, and folded her hands upon her lap. All her better feelings rose. This man might be dull, but he was true and honest and generous, she thought to herself. "I was wrong," she said, with a penitence which he thought very charming. "With you it is a matter of affection, and I have treated it too lightly. You must forgive me! Frankly, I do think it is better to be alone, but I might have said it differently."

He this time kissed the extended hand. Her confession raised her in his opinion and in his esteem.

"Now, dear Cyril, say on! What other things do you wish to talk over with me?"

"About the servants."

"Old family servants?"

"Yes."

"What about them?"

"Are they to stay or are they to go? What do you think; what do you wish?"

"It depends so much upon the light in which they look upon your marriage. If they think me an interloper and resent my coming into the family.... An old servant who knows your ways and the ways of the house would be a help at first. Let things be, Cyril. When I am established there, it will be easy to arrange these things."

This, at any rate, was pleasant.

And then Maria said something which amused him, but which was not so pleasant:—

"I want to go abroad at first."

"Abroad?"

"Yes, dear; you must take me to Paris and other places. Don't look so alarmed. I will be your

interpreter. You need not be frightened; you will never be asked to try to understand or speak a single word of any language but your own."

Cyril could hardly keep his countenance, but the tone in which she spoke was a little trying. Happily, amusement preponderated. After all, with so candid a nature, it would be his own fault if they did not pull together.

"Certainly, we can go abroad if you wish it," he said, hiding his disappointment; he much wanted to be at home again, and at that time of the year Paris would be a desert.

"I do wish it. And going abroad is so good for everyone. You will feel quite a different man when you have been there."

"I daresay I shall," he answered laughingly.

It never occurred to her to ask him whether he had ever been abroad, and it amused him not a little to leave her to find out this and other things.

Then they settled one or two minor points, and

went their several ways. The impression left upon his mind was that there was a charming nature to deal with. How sweet she had been when she saw she had vexed him! Then her amusing way of settling that he could know no language but his own, and the little airs of superiority she gave herself, came before him, and he laughed out loud. Decidedly, he was not much in love.

CHAPTER IV.

A WRONG START.

THROUGH no fault of their own, the engaged couple, placed from the first in a false position in relation to each other, were unlover-like, to say the least of it. Had Mr. Burlington been in love, he might have been hurt by Maria's indifference about details interesting to most girls. But he accounted for everything by the violent affection she was supposed to have conceived for him, and he set everything down to that affection being so sincere and supreme as to dwarf all other things. It was nice of her not to be exacting, and he was so terribly conscious

of being himself in an attitude of criticism much oftener than he wished, that he tried hard to make amends. It was provoking to be amused and alive to her vanity, which was not shown as regarded her personal appearance, but which showed itself in many ways when questions of taste, artistic things, music-books, or any intellectual questions were brought forward.

Maria in well-chosen words gave her opinion, with an air as if her dictum was final. "I don't approve," or "I quite approve of it," was said and was supposed to extinguish discussion. Her character was an amusing study to Cyril, and it did not occur to him that this was hardly the right way to begin married life, and that he was acting wrongly. He admired her very much indeed, and he thought of her in the old home as a brilliant addition. She would look picturesque; and—he had his aunt. It was a great disappointment to find that she had rheumatism and could not come to the wedding.

He even suggested postponing it for a few days, and he regretted having made the suggestion immediately.

But Maria was not put out. She merely passed it over without comment, said very prettily how sorry she was for his vexation, and gave him to understand that the arrangements could in no way be altered.

He was more disturbed than he liked to own by the absence of the only mother he had ever known. On this important occasion he had naturally longed for her presence, and had hoped to show, by increased tenderness and solicitude, that his marriage would make no difference as regarded the affectionate relations existing between them.

Maria saw his annoyance, and, having asserted herself, expressed regrets for his disappointment in a still more charming way. She liked saying kind things to everyone, and was on such excellent terms with herself that she ungrudgingly endeavoured

to put others also on good terms with themselves. This, indeed, was one secret of her widespread popularity. Everyone likes to be "appreciated," and for the moment the appreciation was generally sincere. Afterwards those captious people whom nothing quite satisfies, were provoked by an appreciation which was not distinctive. They liked kind words which they felt were quite justifiable regarding themselves; but they considered those same words singularly inappropriate applied to some commonplace acquaintance they looked down upon.

Maria had such a habit of wishing to please, that she was quite sincere. If the atmosphere of adulation had given her an exaggerated idea of her own attributes, she was, all the same, quite willing to pass on admiration to others, though, of course, in a minor degree, and where she had a real regard she was doubly anxious to please. She had a very sincere regard for Mr. Burlington. She thought it a triumphant proof of her superiority

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that he should be so much in love with her, and that he—avowedly not a marrying man—should have proposed to her. Never were two people more entirely in the dark about the motives of the other! His opinion varied according to his mood. At one moment her openly expressed indifference as to having one bridesmaid or twelve was a proof of superiority and of being above trifles; at another moment it looked odd, and like—indifference.

It was not likely that Cyril Burlington should realise that to Maria he was at present interesting to her as means to an end—as an accident in her life, without which she could not achieve the position she aimed at. She acknowledged that she had a task before her, and no light one, and poor Mr. Burlington was in very complete ignorance of all the plans floating in her very active brain regarding himself.

He looked forward without perhaps much enthusiasm to a quiet domestic life with a companion who was distinctly amiable, even-tempered, and

affectionate—who in time would share his duties, his pleasures, or his anxieties, and whose brilliant personality would brighten the home.

She looked forward to a dazzling career, a brilliant salon, her husband by her exertions an active member of Parliament, occasionally proving in a few well-chosen words how completely he had mastered the burning questions of the day; and as very privately she had not much confidence in his oratorical powers, she fully resolved to supply him with all his eloquence and most of his facts.

People little knew what she would make of him! Her heart thrilled as she looked at the picture which her vivid imagination depicted. She saw herself the central figure of an admiring throng, statesmen consulting her and hanging on her words, a grateful husband always at hand, and sceptical friends compelled to admiration.

What (compared with this remarkable picture) signified the number of her bridesmaids or the colour and cut of their garments?

Finally they were married.

Cyril took the vows solemnly, and with a very full sense of responsibility. Maria looked beautiful, was extremely composed, and, as she had no father or mother to part from, there was no distressing farewell—always rather embarrassing if in public.

They were getting near Paris, when she suddenly remarked that it was stupid not to have thought about rooms; they might find it difficult to get what they wanted.

“Be reassured,” said Cyril, laughing. “I have got rooms, but Paris is a desert just now. August sends every one out of the place except travellers like ourselves.” Maria was surprised, but expressed herself pleased by his thoughtfulness.

“You forget that you have some one to arrange these things for you now,” he said, in a peculiar tone.

Maria smiled, and said no more; but she was a little at a disadvantage, and knew it. She had other things to learn. The hotel was charming,

thoroughly French, and they were welcomed with much enthusiasm, conducted to very pretty rooms, and before the young wife had time to collect her ideas or air her French, she heard her husband speaking rapidly, and fluently giving his orders, answering innumerable questions, evidently quite at home; very much more so than she was herself. Maria was terribly mortified, and remembered only too well her various speeches and offers of help in a direction evidently so little required.

The rooms were delightful, and a very perfect little luncheon was served at once, but Maria could not forget her mortification. It dimmed her usual cheerfulness. A wound to one's vanity is always difficult to digest, and it is all the more difficult when it happens to be a new experience.

Cyril noticed the little cloud, and never for a moment attributed it to the right cause. "You are tired?" he said kindly.

"No; not tired. Cyril, why did you let me talk?

Why did you not frankly say that you knew French well, and had been here often?"

"Oh, is it that?" he said, laughing. "I am afraid I was amused at the time, since everyone knows French in these days, and most men know their Paris!"

"Everyone does not know French," she answered; "I know many people who do not." The question to her was too important to be lightly done with.

She sat silent for a moment, and then spoke quietly but reproachfully. "I suppose you were laughing at me all the time. It was not fair."

"I am sorry. Was it shabby of me? It amused me a little, but I had forgotten it. Forget it now, dear! I knew you would find it out for yourself, sooner or later."

"But you looked so bored when I spoke of coming here."

"What a libel! But Paris with its theatres closed, its best cooks absent, is as dull as London

in September. In the season Paris has many attractions, and I have many friends here. I like it in its holiday dress, when it has no pinafores on."

"Ah!" said his wife, with a long curious look at him. Was Cyril penitent? Against this conclusion was a suppressed look of amusement; and she resented this. She was not of a nature able to put personal annoyance upon one side. She felt somehow placed in the wrong, and anxious to argue herself into a more comfortable frame of mind. She pursued the subject with tenacity.

"How many more languages do you know?" she asked now with much gravity.

He was a little annoyed by her persistence. He wished the subject changed, as it evidently ruffled her; and he was sincerely anxious to make her forget that any jar had occurred. After all, this was such a trifle! He could not understand that to her it was no trifle. At the outset of their married life she had found out that she had been

completely in error, and, to one who had been allowed to consider herself superior in all ways, the first descent from such a pinnacle was painful. "I am not a great linguist," he answered lightly; "of course, when you know Latin and French, other languages are more or less easy."

"There you are wrong, I know," said Maria, with a note of triumph in her voice. "Latin and French may help with Italian; but German—they can do you no earthly good in that direction!"

"And yet German grammar comes much more easily after Latin grammar," he answered laughing.

"Oh, I am not thinking of grammar; the great thing is to be able to speak and to understand."

"And grammar is of no use, eh?"

She was afraid of not holding her position. So she asked him again. "How many languages can you speak?"

"If you put it in that way, I speak German and Italian."

“And you have been to Germany and Italy?”

“Often.”

She was silent. It seemed so extraordinary to her that she had never realised that he had been so much abroad. She had taken into her head from the first that he was a typical Englishman whose public-school days had deprived him of foreign advantages.

“Where have you been besides?” she asked at length; “I am ready to believe you have been to China—everywhere.”

He laughed. “I have travelled a good deal, and I regret now that I visited all the places I went to, when I was very young—Japan, China, Russia. My dear aunt sent me abroad every holiday, and I liked going. I had a very clever tutor, and we enjoyed it all. Looking back now I see my mistake was giving up the University for this. I took the crude notions of a youth everywhere with me, and lost much. If I had been first to Oxford, and had

gone on with a more matured mind, it would have left more satisfactory results behind."

Maria was completely silenced for a few moments. Cyril at length asked her what she was thinking about.

"I am thinking," she answered, in a tone of slow resentment, "that you have not behaved fairly or well to me. Why did you never tell me all this? It seems strange."

"If you will look back," he said, quietly, "you will see that more than once I wished to tell you about my various exploits, and you invariably snubbed me. I remember an instance regarding Japan."

Maria's face grew hot. She remembered that on one occasion she had peremptorily stopped a discussion about a book she had liked, and, having always considered her husband as perfectly unintellectual, she had refused to listen to his reasons for disliking the book, which was on Japan, its manners, customs, and position in art.

Cyril misinterpreted her silence, and said kindly.

"When you like, dear, you shall see my notes, follow my wanderings, and criticise my sketches. I used to enjoy everything at the time. Now I am longing to be at home again, to begin my home-life with you to brighten it all for me."

She was a little mollified by this speech. That she had not quite forgotten, he soon had occasion to know.

They went out and dined at an excellent restaurant, where he had ordered the dinner beforehand.

As they left it she proposed strolling through the Champs Elysées instead of driving, and he acquiesced. They passed a small open-air theatre with the usual little crowd behind it. Maria stopped, rather to his surprise. Then she said, "Though you put me in the wrong to-day about languages and things, you are not always right. You said all the theatres were shut. You see for yourself that at any rate one is open!"

Cyril was so surprised, that words completely

failed him. He could not understand the offence he had been guilty of, and to explain the distinctions between the theatres he had referred to and this, seemed hardly worth while.

She laughed triumphantly. On another point she considered she had equally scored. He had spoken of the shops—of things being in pinafores. The shops were tolerably full of those stuffs of brilliant hues supposed to be attractive to foreign tourists and especially made for their delectation. Maria bought largely, and it was evident to her husband that here again their tastes were not in accord. He preferred quiet tints and detested anything that rustled. His wife did not object to quiet tints, but she liked things to look, as she expressed it, like their money's worth, and everything she wore, as a rule, did rustle more or less.

Very wisely, however, he left this to her, and felt it better not to interfere. The day for their return home was fixed, and nothing occurred again to disturb

the harmony between them. But in Cyril's mind arose the grave reflection, that to keep his wife in brilliant spirits, not to dim her lustre, he must never for a moment show her that she was making a mistake. She must be allowed to suppose herself infallible, and in his own mind Cyril felt this condition to be impossible of fulfilment.

Occasions must—probably often would—arise when the impossibility would be manifest. This uncomfortable conclusion was for the moment overshadowed by that sense of amusement which was at present the result of the critical attitude of his mind regarding her. With the great affection he had been assured she had conceived for him, a day would probably come when she would follow his leading; and her self-assertion was merely the remains of a girlish wish to be always in the position of one who knows everything and has nothing to learn. This idea brought him some consolation.

CHAPTER V.

HOME.

MISS ANNE BURLINGTON was a little puzzled by her nephew's letters, but gathered from their cheerfulness that all was going well with him and the wife he had chosen. She was more puzzled as to what her exact line of conduct should be on the occasion of their home-coming; and no hint was conveyed to her of what she was expected to do, or what part she was to take in their reception.

Should she be there to welcome them, or had she better not receive them? It may be remarked that in all matters of principle, "Aunt Anne" or "Auntie"

was extremely decided, and that in matters of conduct where no principle was involved she was an extremely undecided person. She changed her mind at least fifty times that day, and drove the servants to despair. Luckily for everyone Marsham had views of his own, and his views carried the day. "You just stand there, ma'am," he said, firmly, but with all due respect; "and look pleased at the young lady. If you are not there she'll maybe fancy she is not welcome."

"I think your advice is good, Marsham; not that I want to look as if the place was mine. You do not suppose that she will think I am trying to look like being mistress of the house still?"

"No, ma'am; why should she? But if the new mistress is shy a bit—as no doubt she is shy—it will look friendly; and master will miss your face—you know that, I am sure. I think he would take it unfriendly if you are not the first person he sees."

This was so true that Miss Anne acted on it,

and made up her mind to be there and to give that smile of welcome.

All day she was busy with those final touches which arose partly from nervousness (she always dreaded strangers) and partly from a sincere wish to please her nephew's wife. She moved a flower-vase, and put fresh roses wherever she fancied the heat of the day had dimmed their exquisite freshness. It was a trying day for her in many ways.

When but still a child, barely touching the borderland of girlhood, she had been there, waiting for the arrival of her sister and the new brother who had afterwards become so much to her. She recalled now, as she laid a loving and lingering touch upon some of the beautiful china, how she had helped to wash those rare vases, and carry them from the big china-closet,—in which they had been so carefully kept,—to deck the rooms. She sat down to try to recover her cheerfulness, and to bring

back a spirit more in keeping with the day's hopes. Instead of looking back, she must look forward, and she resolutely pushed memory on one side, and braced herself to meet the young wife happily.

Young Mrs. Burlington upon her side was, it may be remarked, not at all shy. She was full of very pleasant excitement; she was going to receive doubtless an ovation, which might be attributed (she allowed in a great degree) to her husband's position in the county; but while aware of this she also intended that the ovation should become a very enthusiastic one when she was seen. She had determined to win everybody's heart, and her dress was carefully studied. Even Mr. Burlington, who noticed dress in detail very little, and who had often been made conscious of his deficiency in this direction by his wife, was struck by it.

Her tall figure was draped in diaphanous white muslin, and a Leghorn hat *à la* Gainsborough was undeniably becoming, and a dust cloak shrouded

her till they reached the station, when it was discarded.

Nothing was wanting to complete her satisfaction: tenants on horseback, tenants on foot, joybells ringing, triumphal arches—drooping from the heat and looking a little sorry for themselves, as triumphal arches have a way of doing under a broiling sun—schoolchildren, and all else. Everything was just as it should be.

Mr. Burlington glanced at his wife—she might be a little overwhelmed and emotional at so public a demonstration.

He himself felt a huskiness in his throat, and was much impressed by the cordiality and evidence of kindly feeling which went quite beyond his expectations; but Maria was radiant with satisfaction, smiling and bowing right and left, and as far from being emotional as she could well be.

This was, of course, satisfactory; but that tiresome capability of criticism which had tormented him

before, made him think that a little emotion would have been more becoming, and more in keeping with his own sentiments.

However, they drove up under the arching lime trees to the house, where Aunt Anne, half smiles and half tears, enfolded him in her motherly embrace, and where the two dozen servants were arranged to greet their new mistress.

Then Aunt Anne embraced young Mrs. Burlington, and she confessed to herself that the word "brilliant" exactly suited her. Maria performed her part graciously and gracefully, and turned to view the heterogeneous crowd clustering round the front door steps.

She smiled, bowed, and was immensely cheered; and then she took her husband and everyone else by surprise. She stepped forward before her astonished "protector," and made the assembled multitude a little speech, in which there was less of the thanks for their trouble in showing their

goodwill by riding and walking several miles to welcome "the happy pair" than of kindly patronage. Aunt Anne was so surprised that she gave a little gasp. Mr. Burlington finished off his wife's speech by heartfelt thanks, supplemented what she had left unsaid, and invited them all to have refreshments before they returned home.

Certainly, young Mrs. Burlington was not shy! Aunt Anne was pressed to remain and dine, but she declined. She was tired by the long day's many little duties, and was longing for rest. Maria turned to her husband and said, "Pray, see your aunt home, Cyril; you have plenty of time, and I shall be glad to get rid of you for a little." She nodded, flashed one of her most radiant smiles at him, and disappeared.

When the aunt and nephew were alone, the young wife was the one subject never mentioned. Mr. Burlington was longing to speak of her, but found his words might take the form almost of an

apology, and thought it best left alone, and Aunt Anne was much too bewildered to mention her; in her quiet, serene life, no one exactly like her had ever crossed her path, but for that reason she could not make up her mind about her. At any rate time will show, she thought; and this stereotyped comfort she held to, as she talked now of one or two changes in the house, next of the gardens, the sad decay of a giant oak in the park, and of those many trifles magnified into interests of importance in the monotony of a very quiet life.

And if Mr. Burlington was disappointed at any rate he did not show that he was so. He sat some time with his aunt, much approved of her arrangements, and hurried home a little late, glad that so short a distance separated him from the comfort and counsel she might give him.

His wife was in great good humour. "I am sure you will like to know how thoroughly pleased I am with my new home," she said, passing her

arm through his as they went to dinner. "Everything is so pretty, so quaint, and on such a big scale. I never realised what an important place it was. I am charmed with it."

"It is a nice old place. But it has never been very cheerful. I look to you, dear, to brighten it up a bit."

"Indeed I will. People will soon call, and we shall gather many of the best people round us. This place has great capabilities!"

They took their places as she said this, and the presence of Marsham and the footmen prevented any rejoinder; but Cyril reflected that the brightness he had alluded to had not, in his own mind, referred to other people, even of the best sort.

The dinner was good, and, though the small table looked very small in the big dining-room, there was still so bright a light from the westering sun that it did not lack cheerfulness.

Cyril called his wife's attention to one or two

pictures—heirlooms, and of great value. Maria looked at them very attentively. Then she gave a little smile, and said, in French, “Very good copies—but only copies.”

Cyril laughed, though he was not particularly pleased. “It is as well Aunt Anne did not hear you. I assure you they are original; they have a history.”

“My dear Cyril, every house of any pretensions in England has one or more pictures with histories. I am sure I have seen the originals of these somewhere; and as to Aunt Anne, I do trust she won’t mind my being a truthful person. It is one of my few merits.” She finished with one of her most brilliant smiles, as if challenging his answer.

“There is a difference in speaking the truth and asserting what you merely believe to be the truth.”

“Ah, I see it does not answer with you. I can easily avoid giving an opinion, but if I give one, I must say exactly what I think.”

"In that case it would be well to inform yourself accurately beforehand on any subject you intend to dogmatise upon."

"Well, never mind now; we can talk of something else," said young Mrs. Burlington, much as if she was giving in to a dreadfully spoiled child.

Cyril was annoyed to find how much her tone ruffled him. Afraid of betraying annoyance, he remained silent.

Maria after a little while rose, and sauntered over to the window; then opened it, and went out into the shrubbery. Her husband watched her graceful figure for a moment. It shocked and distressed him that at the very outset of their home life they had drifted into something verging on a quarrel! He hurried into the grounds after her. She turned to greet him with her usual pretty smile. He drew her hand under his arm, and they paced the walks and explored the more distant terraces, from where a beautiful view of the rich and lovely land lying

below the park, swept on till merged in the golden haze of the sunset.

Cyril would have given much for a few words to show perfect harmony with each other's thoughts; but he was deterred, because if he expressed regret that there had been a little jar between them she might accept it as an apology, and he was much too honest to offer one where none was justly demanded from him. So an occasional remark requiring very few words by way of answer made the sum total of their conversation that evening.

All the same, he felt the influence of the hour, the hush and stillness which succeed the busy day, the sleepy notes of the birds, the mysterious shadows which make even jarring discords of colour blend into harmony. He trusted she felt it too.

All at once Maria gave a little ladylike yawn. "I think," she said, in her softest tone, "as I am very tired, and we are boring each other dreadfully, I shall go in and go to bed."

She slipped her hand away from his arm, and walked across the lawn. It was still early, and her husband watched her as he had done before, and saw her go into the house, and again found himself making excuses for her. Of course she was tired; people who show their emotions least, are precisely those who feel them most, he said to himself.

When he was tired of walking up and down he also went in, and, taking one of his favourite books, read for some time. But, altogether, this was not quite what he had imagined his married life would be, or the way in which his first evening at home would be spent, when his young wife was in the house.

CHAPTER VI.

THE COUNTY MAP.

IT was unfortunate (in the eyes of Mr. Burlington at least) that the day which followed that of their home-coming was one of the wettest days on record; at least so every one said. Had the sun been shining, the place would have looked very lovely with the wealth of foliage, the gay flower-beds, and the sparkle on the fountain. But the rain came down in that hopeless, persistent way which is at all times very aggravating. Cyril woke to the melancholy sound of patter and drip on the conservatory, and dressed to the same tune, which was

depressing. Everything has its drawback, and the drawback of a big conservatory tacked on to a house is the aggressive noise of pattering rain, which is never anything but a trial.

It was with reluctance that he went to the breakfast-room. Anxious to do the honours of his place well, he felt, as others have felt before him, as if in some way he was responsible for the lack of sunshine—as if he ought to apologise for that and all other deficiencies. But Maria was engrossed in a pile of letters, looked up for a moment to bid him a cheerful welcome, and did not seem to notice that anything was wrong. She put away her letters and prepared to make his tea, and was in a very cheerful, pleasant mood. What a charm there is in such an even temper, thought her husband, in profound admiration. A great number of people would be annoyed by such a damp and depressing atmosphere by way of welcome.

“I am very sorry you have such a wet day for

your first day at home," he said, with real regret.

"I was longing to show you the place."

"Is it raining?" she asked, looking out of the window. "I declare it is raining, and very hard; not that it matters; I want to look over things, see the capabilities of the house, and have really a great deal to see, to do, and to arrange."

"I am very glad you are so independent of the weather," he said, cordially. "And I shall like showing you the house myself. When will you come—at once?"

"As soon as I have seen the housekeeper," she answered, laughing. "I suppose I may finish my breakfast first?"

He joined in her laugh, which was rather infectious. Though the weather was bad outside, certainly everything was very cheerful within this morning.

"Before seeing the house or anything else, I want to see a map of this part of the country. Have you got a good one?"

"Yes, in the library; and a map of the property. What do you particularly want to know?"

"I want to know who are our neighbours, how many we have, and the various distances."

"Oh, about neighbours... I suppose they will soon find you out. I am afraid I was never sociable enough to please them." He spoke with a certain hesitation, and finished by remarking. "I am sure they will all be kind." His wife was struck by his tone. "I suppose they will all call. As to being *kind*—is there any reason why they should be unkind? It is an odd way of putting it."

"Is it, dear? You see I have a great deal to learn," he said, in a curious voice. "You must show me how to put things. Now, pray, see Mrs. Butt, and join me in the library afterwards."

Maria went off full of her interview. She had a pleasant manner, and everything went smoothly. Mrs. Butt much respected a lady who understood offhand so much about made dishes, and Maria was

always willing to accept homage from anyone. Then she went to the library, and studied the map in very real earnest. She was longing to make acquaintance with everyone, and most anxious to begin her "career" at once. It must be frankly stated that, if mischief arose out of the innocent study of the county map, Mr. Burlington himself was to blame. The masculine mind often fails to understand that a prohibition, a slur over anything, or a little mystery on any given point, serves to concentrate the feminine mind upon that point. In dilating upon the large possessions of the Beryls, the Adleybournes and others who possessed smaller properties, he carefully abstained from pointing out one of the nearest places, passing it over quickly, though it actually dovetailed into the home farm and faced an entrance to his own park.

Maria promptly noticed this, and, laying her finger on the spot, asked him whose it was, and why he had omitted it.

"The people who live there are not friends of mine," he said, shortly. "I hardly think they will call. . . . If they do, you need only just return the visit and have done with them."

"Is there anything wrong with them?"

Cyril hesitated. He was honest, and was obliged to say, "Not in anyway. . . . Not, as I suppose, you mean it; but they are not people you will care to cultivate."

"Oh, middle-class people?"

"Not at all; but—in short, people I should dislike your making friends with."

Maria said no more, but she made a mental memorandum to find out everything about them as soon as possible.

She did not ask their name, which her husband thought nice of her, but she saw the property marked "Hundred," and she intended to remember it, dropping the subject now altogether. The maps were rolled up, and, not without natural satisfaction,

Cyril showed his wife over the rooms. They were large and lofty, and the style of everything was of the best old fashion before the Georgian era. Decorations were carefully suited to different rooms, and nothing could have been more charming to anyone with good taste; panelled walls in cedar wood in one room, beautifully embossed leather in another, and the music-room (which was octagon) had a splendid vaulted roof; the daintiest Italian paintings adorned both walls and ceiling. Maria was enchanted with everything, and frankly said so.

The large staircase had old oak bannisters, with curious carvings, and there were a great many bedrooms.

"Let me see," said Maria. "Ten, twelve, fourteen big rooms! My dear Cyril! Your home—our house—is perfect. How soon can we ask people here?"

Cyril looked a little blank, a little surprised.

"You do not want to fill the house at once?"

he said, at length.

“Why not? What is the use of having this lovely house empty?”

“We might have a little quiet together first, you and I. We have had no real quiet yet, have we?”

“We were quite alone part of every day in Paris; and I do think it such a mistake to grow bored and tired of each other, and then have people in to distract one.”

“Why should we grow bored or tired of each other?” he asked, with a certain misgiving. “I am not likely to be bored, and I trust you will find your happiness at home, and not want strangers to distract you.”

“Oh, I never bore myself,” she answered, laughing; “it does not matter in the least. Only——”

“Only what?”

“I am simply dying to show the place to every one. My people would not allow me to call mine a brilliant marriage. They were all so surprised.

Some of them would change their opinion if they saw the place."

"You did not marry the place, as you never saw it," said her husband gravely. Her speech jarred dreadfully upon him.

"Of course not, dear. But you know how stupid friends are. I dare say your people wondered at your marrying me, simply because I was an unknown quantity to them."

Poor Cyril reflected on drawbacks of a far more serious nature.

"You see," said Maria, "I suppose friends never see more than the surface of things; and as I was supposed to be—well, not dull, they did not understand."

"And what was the attraction?" Cyril asked, with repressed eagerness.

His wife stopped short, and faced him. Never had she pleased him! more, than now by her answer. "I had a conviction, I knew, that you were generous in your ideas about me, that you were

loyal, that you were kind. I know others were not."

He pressed her hand. Anxious to find out how much she knew, he said, "What were they unkind about?"

"Oh," said Maria, shaking off her seriousness, "I think they were jealous, perhaps."

She moved on, and a confidence between them was lost, which might have saved many future troubles.

The rain stopped after luncheon, and, though still very wet underfoot, it was fine enough for a drive, and some delightful, quick-stepping cobs came round—a new purchase.

Cyril, who was an unfortunately acute observer, had been disturbed ever since the conclusion of his wife's speech that forenoon, the beginning of which had so charmed him. But the sweetness of the air after heavy rain, the freshness and beauty of everything, chased away every disagreeable idea, and it was pleasant to drive about with so appreciative a companion.

She was delighted with everything, with the undulating richly-wooded grounds, the masses of woods, the hurtling river, and the wide and fertile valley.

The beauty of everything was soon enhanced by the sun. Tired of sulky conduct he shone out splendidly. Maria was radiant. She enjoyed the drive immensely, was amusingly important, and finally delighted her husband by proposing to call at his aunt's and persuade her to go home with them. He had been longing to suggest this, but had felt that the proposal should come from her.

She made it with such a natural grace that he was charmed with her; and he drove to the Manor House with more conviction about his happiness than ever. Aunt Anne was engaged, and they waited in her prettily arranged drawing-room for some time.

When she appeared she looked pale, and was

to her nephew's observant eyes, not her usual self. But his wife saw nothing. She was bent on winning everyone, Aunt Anne included, and made herself very pleasant, so pleasant that her husband blamed himself for thinking her manner a little too assured—too patronizing. People on delightfully good terms with themselves are a little apt to be patronizing, and the position of one who fills the place of another, while that other is in sight, is proverbially a difficult one.

All Aunt Anne's efforts at being natural, all her best endeavours to respond to proffered affection appeared cold and formal, contrasted with the overflowing good humour of the beautifully dressed young woman beside her, who was so conscious of having the best of it, that it appeared in all her gestures and all her speeches.

"I know you will be glad to hear how charmed I am with my new home," she said, radiantly, "I really have not a fault to find, Cyril is so

modest ; he spoke so little about the place, that I never realised that it was such a beautiful, such an ideal home. He does himself injustice in so many ways ; you and I must join together and draw him out of his shell."

Aunt Anne had no answer ready, and gave a vague smile, forgiving the insinuation because of an affectionate glance very openly bestowed on Cyril by the young wife.

"It is a great thing to have received a pleasant first imprssion," she said kindly.

"Ah! and my first impressions always last," said Maria, cheerfully. "You see, I do not go through the world with my eyes shut. You will soon see Cyril quite a different man. I have already startled him by assuring him I do not mean to be shut up. I intend to draw everyone round me, making ourselves a centre—a brilliant centre. With such a home it becomes a duty."

She stood up, flushed by her excitement and rapid

enunciation; handsome, and yet sending a swift misgiving into Aunt Anne's mind. Brilliant! yes; she was brilliant. But was she the wife for Cyril? With her quiet saddened life, her ideas which were old-fashioned and out of date, thinking the wife should follow where the husband led, should find happiness in the narrow circle of home, and fulfil her highest aspirations in adding to her husband's happiness, Aunt Anne heard with a pang doctrines she believed to be fatal to home happiness.

Cyril was anxious that Aunt Anne should approve. He was too anxious, and his anxiety led him into making a mistake. "You will frighten Aunt Anne, my dear Maria, if you talk of being a centre; and you are doing yourself an injustice. How often have you not longed to be out of the London whirl, and more able to lead your own life!"

"Quite true. It is a great tax to have to be pleasant to other people's friends, and I always wanted to choose my own. But I must first see

my material—test the qualities, virtues, and shortcomings of my surrounding neighbours, and form my society out of them.”

Aunt Anne was dumb. Mr. Burlington tried to turn the conversation, but in vain. Maria felt it due to herself to be frank, and she was frank. “About politics, dear Aunt Anne, I suppose your politics are coloured by Cyril’s? Mine are distinctly different.”

“Indeed!” said Cyril, believing this to be a jest.

“‘Indeed’ is not a nice way of answering me,” said young Mrs. Burlington; “but, though my political principles are very elastic, I am quite a Radical, and, if Cyril has fixed Conservative principles, we shall disagree.” She gave a charming smile as she uttered this warning.

“You alarm me,” said Mr. Burlington, playfully.

“I think it such a great blessing we women are not called upon to put our ideas before the world,” said Anne, quietly. “Women are apt to infuse bitterness and narrowness into these things, and I

confess I am glad I have no vote to trouble my conscience."

"Ah, my dear Aunt Anne, you are, I am afraid, one of those people who keep womankind back," exclaimed Mrs. Burlington. "We must discuss this subject at another time, when Cyril is not present. I have many convincing arguments. I shall convert you."

"I doubt it," said Aunt Anne.

"We shall see. Now, will you not come and dine with us to-night? do."

"I hope you will not think me unkind, but I have a really bad headache. It is nice of you to wish me to join you," she added, laying her hand kindly on her new niece's arm. "Ah, well, another time," and Maria bid good-bye, and rustled out of the room with a feeling of having made a conquest.

"I think the dear old thing rather likes me," she said to Cyrils as they drove off.

He was so astonished that he had no answer

ready. Then, afraid of appearing captious, he said, laughing lightly, "I suppose she appears old to you."

"She is old," said his wife. "Women are old after fifty; men are only in their prime ten years later; and your dear aunt looks older than she need look because she wears such old-fashioned caps and things. That is the worst of burying oneself in the country, and not seeing what goes on in the world."

"I cannot imagine my dear aunt in any fashionable garments," Cyril said, struggling with a feeling of annoyance at hearing her so openly discussed. "She is herself—that pretty soft cap, and her white hair—the whole thing suits her. She has such a lovely, calm, sweet countenance."

"But she looks old," insisted his wife. "Now, in the world she would have her hair so arranged that caps would not be necessary for years to come."

"I have the bad taste to prefer caps to the alternative, wigs."

"My dear Cyril, we never talk of wigs."

"I have a country habit of calling things by their right names."

"Yes, you are a little provincial," said his wife, after a moment's reflection. "It is one of the things I intend curing you of."

Her tone amused more than irritated him, and they arrived at home with a consciousness of different views on many other subjects besides the first one—the pictures. Far, far more different was the effect this consciousness had upon them individually. Maria's spirits rose at the prospect of so many directions in which improvement was desirable.

She so completely believed in herself, and was so confident of her powers of mastery over every difficulty, that it roused and excited her. She had a little dreaded the monotony of married life and

the perpetual acquiescence from her husband that she anticipated. It was delightful to her to find that so much occupation and employment for her powers was provided for her.

Mr. Burlington went to the library, took a book—which he did not read—and felt unaccountably depressed. In all the small differences of opinion between his wife and himself, he recognised that he gained nothing, and, without being able to account for it, he was somehow invariably put in the wrong. He had a great disadvantage in not knowing anything about women, and he was not in love. Had there been that glamour, it would have helped him, but, through no fault of his own or hers, he was starting in a false position.

He was always drifting into an attitude of criticism, which disturbed him and he questioned himself in vain. How could he give the answer, having no clue? All he knew was that he was uncomfortable and unhappy; all that even in these early days

seemed to be left for him to do, was to excuse everything he did not approve of, so long as principle was not involved, in consideration of the deep and devoted affection he had been distinctly told was felt by his wife for his unworthy self.

CHAPTER VII.

THE NEIGHBOURS.

MRS. BURLINGTON had plenty of time to study the county map before the more important and distant country neighbours came over to call; and she realised from this leisurely manner of their coming to welcome her and to make acquaintance that there was not altogether that ardent enthusiasm which she had privately expected.

In all the varied positions in life, counterbalancing influences are often forgotten or not properly taken into account. The most disinterested mothers might be forgiven for having thought Mr. Burlington a

desirable son-in-law. He was known to be well off, amiable, to be of good family, and to be free from hereditary ailments. There was not a page in his history that might not be seen without fear of the smallest blot, through many generations, and in some of the greater families, people knew this was not always the case.

With so many fair and amiable girls to select from, the county a little resented the choice of an outsider whose history was a little vague. However, everyone had to go, and all had to smother their private feelings, and make the best of things.

Now, there are many ways of making new acquaintances. Maria's way was by being so terribly civil as to appear patronizing. She was honestly anxious to make a good impression, and to please; but her idea of pleasing was to force the admiration of those she was confronted with, and to dazzle them by her brilliancy, and by those polished tricks of manner she had always found so successful. She

wanted first to shine, and then amiably to condescend.

Old Lady Bridstone and her younger husband, Sir Harvey, to whom she was very much married, was extremely displeased to find so young a woman on such excellent terms with herself. Everyone, more or less, dislikes this in a young woman, but Lady Bridstone was accustomed herself to patronize people, and to find that what she said or did influenced other people. She was an elderly, spare, and rather distinguished-looking person, and had a curious habit of pausing before giving any reply to the simplest question—a habit which gave her words when they did come, an air of reflection which they did not merit.

“We have a very good neighbourhood, Mrs. Burlington,” she said, expansively, after the first preliminaries were over, and she was seated on the sofa. “You will like this neighbourhood. We are very fortunate; so many beautiful places within

reach; so much friendliness, so many resident proprietors. It is quite the best neighbourhood I know; no fear of your being dull."

"I am not afraid of being dull, I never am dull," answered Maria, laughing a little. "Is the society literary or musical? What are the amusements? Country life is a novelty to me; but I mean to enjoy everything."

Lady Bridstone paused a little while; then she answered, "Tennis parties, garden parties draw people together. I suppose you like tennis?"

"Frankly, I detest it," said the young wife. "I hate getting hot, and ruffling my clothes, and——"

"Maria, Sir Harvey has just told me that they propose having a garden party, and he hopes we will go," interrupted Mr. Burlington, quickly.

"I will go with pleasure, if you promise not to expect me to play tennis; I am just shocking Lady Bridstone by announcing that I hate exertion."

"I am afraid that our country gatherings will

appear very flat to you after your London gaieties," said Sir Harvey, who generally had the misfortune to say something exactly opposite to his wife's speeches, and who heard of it afterwards. "I am afraid you will find it dull."

"I mean to be very indulgent, and not expect too much," said Mrs. Burlington. "Of course, in London one has wider experiences, and can choose one's own society; but I am never dull, never! I have too much to think about to be ever dull."

Lady Bridstone paused as usual, and then said, "Perhaps you write, yourself?"

"Oh, dear no! I can never fill half a sheet of notepaper; even to Mr. Burlington I found my expected daily letter quite a difficulty."

She smiled at her husband, who, however, did not see it, and went on: "I think, in these days, when everyone scribbles, it is quite a distinction not to be in print."

There was a dead silence. Then Mr Burlington

asked Lady Bridstone a trifling question, and turned the conversation.

But it was quite evident, even to Maria who was a little slow in noting the effect of any of her speeches, that she had in some way made a mistake.

When a stiff and formal farewell was being spoken, she said, with rather a heightened colour, "I am afraid I have offended you, Lady Bridstone; what is it?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing—only as I write a good many things myself——"

"I see," said Maria; "it was very stupid of me to say it!" Her husband was delighted with her; she was showing pluck, and would surely disarm Lady Bridstone. Unfortunately; before a reply could be given, she spoiled everything by adding, very innocently, "I had not the slightest idea you wrote anything; I never heard of it."

This, for a woman who in her part of the world was counted rather a celebrity, was too much.

Her good-bye was uttered with freezing coldness, and Maria was annoyed and mortified. It made matters worse when her husband laughed as he had never laughed before. "You really have a talent for saying wrong things," he said. "Poor Lady Bridstone! Why on earth did you not leave well alone? The first part of your speech was enough to disarm anyone—then to spoil it all!"

"I cannot help speaking the truth."

"No one asked you to say anything. However, it can't be helped. I am afraid we shall both be in that poor woman's bad books for the rest of our natural lives."

"I may be, but you—you have done nothing, said nothing."

"Exactly. My not having told you will offend her far more than your speech. She will lay all the blame on my shoulders."

"Luckily your shoulders are broad. I do not believe you care a bit."

"Why should I care?" He was surprised at her tone, which was reproachful.

"Only that I think you should care when your wife, by a mere accident, makes herself obnoxious to any one."

"It is too trifling a matter to worry about," he answered lightly, and he turned away.

To herself, not to him, Maria said that she had made herself ridiculous in the eyes of a stranger, and Cyril only laughed.

This was not her idea of devotion. It was not what she had been led to expect. A man passionately in love, as he had been represented to be, should be up in arms at the idea of her being lowered in anyone's eyes. The feeling of mortification was new and painful to her, and, greatly to Mr. Burlington's surprise, she showed by an increased silence and an assumption of outraged dignity that her resentment was lasting.

To a woman, full of self-confidence, the position

was embarrassing; and her husband ought to have flattered and soothed her. Instead of that, he had only laughed at her. She could not forgive him!

Just when this episode was being forgotten, Mrs. Adleybourne and two daughters came to call. Husband and wife had been riding, and Maria was taking off her habit when they arrived. Cyril was ready, and as he looked into her room to tell her he was going down, she asked him whether this lady had any particular gifts, so that she might avoid offending her.

"Gifts! poor dear soul. She has none that I know of. She is a handsome and very stupid woman; good-natured, I believe, but I know her very little. As her husband died many years ago there was nothing in connection with county business to bring us together. Come down as soon as you can."

Maria hurried, and made an impressive picture

when she appeared upon the scene. She had some soft white clinging stuff which was very becoming to her face and figure, and much enhanced her beautiful complexion. Mrs. Adleybourne was a tall rather gaunt woman with a good many angles, but undeniably handsome. Many years previously she had been painted by the greatest artist of the day, as a Madonna, with her eldest child clasped in her arms. She still wore her hair braided in the same way, and had never changed the cut of her garments. Her face was placid, and she was fair, and might have served as a model to any of the painters of the most insipid Madonnas in the room devoted to them in Berlin.

Her two daughters were, unfortunately, plain likenesses of herself—unfortunately as their plainness was not of the intelligent-taking kind, that redeems roughly completed features, and so often wins the day against regularity of feature and much beauty.

Never had Mrs. Burlington found conversation more difficult! There seemed a hopeless absence of any common ground upon which to establish or begin acquaintance. Mrs. Adleybourne had only been in London once for a fortnight during the last five years, and she remarked plaintively that she had been struck by the increase of frivolity. Dissipation was not in her line. She did not care for music, except that of oratorios. In short, whatever Maria tried to talk about fell hopelessly to the ground. The two girls said very little, and were so miserable at finding the contrast so great between their old-fashioned dress and Maria's fresh and original toilette, that they eyed her in silence.

Driven to despair, at length she proposed, as Mrs. Adleybourne professed a great love for flowers, to go to the conservatory, the garden, and the hot-houses, to show some new and very beautiful lilies straight from Japan. All went apparently well. Maria did not know any botanical names, and Mrs.

Adleybourne discoursed rather learnedly about ferns and grapes and parasites, orchids, etc., when her hostess said, laughingly, "I cannot answer you, because I am quite ignorant of these things. I admire them. That is all. If I tried to call anything by a learned botanical name, I should most likely be in the position of some person my husband told me of, who thought she knew all about these things, and called a passion flower—unknown to her—an orchid."

There was once more an ominous silence, and Mr. Burlington's face grew terribly red. Conversation languished more than ever, and, without returning to the drawing-room, the whole party left, the farewells being as frigid as that of Lady Bridstone.

"My dear Cyril, what is it!" exclaimed Maria breathlessly. "How have I offended this time?"

"My dear Maria," he answered, his laughing eyes contradicting the gravity of his tone, "you are sin-

gularly unfortunate. And on this occasion I can only blame myself. We cannot help it, but—the lady who so persistently maintained that the new flower was an orchid was—Mrs. Adleybourne herself!”

CHAPTER VIII.

DIFFERENT VIEWS ON CONJUGAL FELICITY.

AUNT ANNE, who was unselfish, devoted, and affectionate, was, perhaps because of these last two qualities, especially clear-sighted where Cyril's happiness was concerned. She gave due credit to his wife for her even temper, her cheerfulness, her good looks, and her wish to please. But the more she saw the two together the less she could understand what had attracted her nephew. She tried to believe in an ardent affection, and she saw indulgent kindness. Miss Burlington was romantic enough to believe in a love which was blind. Mr. Burlington was only

too evidently not blind, as he constantly made kind speeches about his wife which took the form of an apology to his aunt's quick understanding.

Was Cyril hiding anything from her? Was he happy? What had led to his marriage? How vain these questions were need hardly be said, as no satisfactory answer could possibly be given.

Weighing everything dispassionately, Miss Burlington was almost equally puzzled in regard to his wife. At first she had done her the injustice to fancy that a good income, a certain fixed, well-defined position, and a fine place, had been the several attractions. But she soon saw that she was wrong. Maria had never known any want of income, therefore she did not prize it. She did not in the least realise Cyril's position in the county, and, though she openly admired the place as a place, she often regretted their being a fixture, and would evidently have preferred a nomadic life, and—London.

However, as the days passed by and she found

no capricious temper, no unreasonable requirements, nothing she most dreaded in a London young lady, Aunt Anne began to see more to approve of in Cyril's wife, and they insensibly drew more together. Indeed, to understand completely a character like that of Maria it required a person of far greater discernment than Miss Burlington possessed, and one accustomed to study character. Maria clung to her own ideas with a tenacity of purpose which would have served a great purpose well. For the present she was content. She had made two fiascos, she would learn to know her surroundings thoroughly, she must have everything clear to her; then she intended to fill the house and show that she had it in her to play the part of leader. She would draw round her conflicting parties, and handle every one so skilfully that she would reconcile people, and be the centre, the motive power, the wire-puller, without a single soul being aware whose hands were guiding, checking, or pushing everything into action.

She sat quite happily, picturing everything to herself. She rehearsed mentally all the conversations; and, though she certainly never carried these arguments very far, and they were vague and suggestive, she always gave herself the best of them.

Her husband was much satisfied to find that her first idea of filling the house had so completely subsided. Like all men who had not the habit of society, he was happier alone, and his books were his real friends. He thought it nice of his wife to give up so cheerfully and so quickly to his wishes. This was what should be always the case; a husband, especially a husband some years older than the wife, should be able to influence and check wishes, probably the mere outcome of a passing fancy. Maria was looking very well one evening, when Aunt Anne had joined them at dinner. She had a most becoming tea-gown on, an artful combination of pale rose and white lace, and Cyril

had said something quite complimentary, which had pleased her. Toying with a tiny apostle spoon and the last morsel of sugar in the bottom of her coffee cup, Maria looked up at him, and said, archly, "Do you remember what to-day is?"

"Is it an anniversary?" he asked, in some surprise. They had not known each other a year. Therefore, what anniversary could they venerate in common?

"We have been at home a whole month—a whole calendar month to-day. We arrived here on the 7th, and here we are. To-day is the 7th."

"What does this solemn statement portend?" he asked quietly.

"It portends nothing; but I remind you of the fact because I promised to ask no one here for a whole month's quiet. We were to run the risk of boring each other for that time."

"And you have been bored?"

"Well, it has not been wildly amusing, has it?" she said, with unnecessary frankness.

He was excessively vexed. Had they been alone he would have felt hurt by her tone. Before Aunt Anne he was extremely annoyed.

"You cannot contradict me," she said, fixing eyes all unconscious of offence on him. "You are so excellent and so good! and, like myself, you are truthful. I always am! It is one of my merits!"

"I am old-fashioned," said Aunt Anne, in a gentle, deprecating voice, "but I am certain that these jests are a little wrong I know it is a jest. but still——"

"It is no jest, my dear good Aunt Anne. Any two people thrown solely and entirely upon each other's society must be a little dull. In time, I know in time, I shall rouse Cyril, and give him animation and appreciation and a taste for society; but all things must have a beginning, and by gathering people round us we get ideas. This house is such a nice old house, and has endless

capabilities; we must have society around us, and not live only for ourselves."

There was one of the short pauses which, in very intimate society, generally means disapproval.

Cyril spoke in rather a constrained tone. "Then your idea of happiness is never to be alone; to be always in a crowd?"

"It would be difficult to crowd these rooms, and country society is so limited," answered young Mrs. Burlington; "but to have people staying here—yes!"

"Already!" said Aunt Anne; like an unwise woman echoing Cyril's words.

"Already! My dear Cyril, if you prefer your library, your musty books, reports of prisons, road-scrapers, and all these dreary matters, please do not think my tastes are the same. After all, what is the objection? If you had wanted a humdrum wife who thought parish work interesting, and tennis parties dissipation, why did you fall in love with me?"

Poor Cyril coloured. He sometimes lately had

reproached himself for having so little of that passion; but he was very far from guessing that he had been a puppet in the hands of Maria's aunt, and had been talked into the marriage by a good deal of judicious flattery,—the flattery of being told that he was an object of deep interest and affection to a very brilliant girl. He had often wondered lately whether the passion on her side was quite as deep as was supposed.

This seemed another proof of mistake somewhere. Was this craving for society quite in keeping with an ardent affection such as he had dreamed of long ago? He had had visions of companionship, of reciprocal feelings, of tastes in common, of a wife intelligent enough to appreciate without being anxious to shine. Somehow he had never quite fitted his wife into this picture frame. She seemed to have tastes apart from his, hopes and aspirations beyond his, to be restlessly longing for other society, for a wider range; and his spirit sank because each day

he felt that he did not seem to know her any better. Surely, so speaking a countenance must belong to a woman with a mind of real depth. How was it that each day found him still apart from her serious and better nature—still polite, with a feeling that in many things they were still strangers? But as these thoughts rushed through his mind he caught Aunt Anne's gaze fixed upon him. She was looking sad, and certainly compassionate.

Compassionate! All his loyalty came to his help. It was a trifling matter, but it cost him an effort. "There is no objection," he said, pleasantly. "Fill the house, if you like. I, think that at your age, and with all your varied accomplishments, you should like to have society. We can always have a quiet time, you and I, when you are tired of playing hostess."

He held out his hand, and his wife took it, and pressed it warmly between both of her white hands. She had no conception that it was an effort, but

she had dreaded a rebuff before Aunt Anne, and her glance was full of grateful affection. Never had he done a wiser thing. The next thing was to make a list; and Maria had so many amusing suggestions to make, and so much to say, that it took up a good deal of time. She was so gay that the two others were infected by it, and Aunt Anne went home more charmed by her brightness and her pretty ways than she had ever been. Maria had got her own way, and was enchanted with her victory; but she was careful to keep all look of triumph out of her eyes, and to ask advice and assistance as if the whole idea was as much her husband's as her own.

After all, except that they had for so many years dropped all sorts of hospitality, there was no reason why the house should not be thrown open, and Aunt Anne was not altogether sorry now, that Cyril had accepted the idea.

In the quiet of his own study Mr. Burlington

saw that his own ideas had been routed, and he could not make up his mind whether he was sorry or—relieved. At the same time, the warm, cordial pressure of his wife's hands gave him satisfaction. Appreciation, even imperfect appreciation, is often comforting. There was to be an amateur play and a ball.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FESTIVITIES AT BURLINGTON MANOR.

IT must not be supposed that young Mrs. Burlington had forgotten the place which her husband had ignored, and which, consequently, had excited her curiosity.

The house of the Wyncotes, of Wyncote Hundred, was to her the Blue Beard's closet, to which sooner or later she fully intended to have a key. But just now her mind was pleasantly occupied by the arrangements for the coming festivities. She was charmed to find her husband acquiescing in all her proposals, and approving generally as far as he understood them.

In a neighbourhood which counted one hunt ball and one subscription ball as the two events of the year, talked of prospectively for many months beforehand, the fact that Burlington Manor was to be thrown open in such a charming way was delightful to the whole of that neighbourhood. It made a great sensation. Mrs. Burlington was looked upon with very different eyes; and every young lady in the place worshipped her immediately. "It is so nice of you, dear Mrs. Burlington," was uttered at least a hundred times a day by different people.

Mothers who had judged her a little severely, and had taken exception to those matters in which she differed from their own nestlings, began to see merits—hitherto unperceived—in her frocks, her laugh, her manner, and her smile. The husbands, brothers, and sons, who had avoided giving offence by wisely keeping their private opinions to themselves, were now accused of being dullards. How

extraordinary that they could not notice her merits for themselves. But men were so strangely blind, so hopelessly insensible! The tide had turned with a vengeance.

All this popularity and homage were pleasant to Mrs. Burlington. She submitted very graciously to all this demonstrative enthusiasm, and as, next to being in love, being admired is a great beautifier, never had she looked better or been seen to greater advantage.

At that time everything went well, and Mrs. Burlington was delighted with the position in which her ideas had placed her. A few tiresome things happened. Mrs. Hutchinson, who was enchanted when her girl was kept to dinner and sent home in the brougham afterwards, and who had mentioned the circumstance carelessly to every one, was mortified to find that the same compliment had been paid to a girl she considered much below her daughter's level. Every little thing she had sug-

gested to enhance the compliment shown to her girl applied equally to the second invitation; and Mrs. Hutchinson, who had the courage of her opinions, did not conceal her chagrin, and was as nearly rude as she dared to be when she next saw Mrs. Burlington.

"I had no idea you knew the Harrisons. I have never called. They are not quite in my line."

"Daisy Harrison is a nice girl. I advise you to cultivate her. In a very dull neighbourhood a girl who sings is an acquisition; and one good thing is, that in a small country town everyone is more or less on the same level, it saves so much trouble. When my people come, after disposing of the big wigs I shall have to send all the others in by turn."

"I advise you not to do that, Mrs. Burlington."

"No? How would you have it done? Alphabetically?"

"Some people are well born, well connected, and might be very much offended."

"I am afraid," answered Mrs. Burlington with her usual amused laugh, "that I cannot help it. After all, what can it matter?" These small differences can affect people little. It is only in a small provincial town that people are tenacious. Besides, when there is no apparent social distinction, what is one to do? One cannot know these things by instinct."

"People learn these things and the other duties of their position—in time." Mrs. Hutchinson spoke frigidly; but Mrs. Burlington had not the slightest idea that she was offending her, and it was only later on, when she made other discoveries, that she made this one also.

Cyril Burlington was himself pleased that he had given way. His wife had, probably, spoken the truth. They had shut themselves up too much, and there was no reason they should not, for once in a way, fill the house and give his neighbours an opportunity of making the acquaintance of his wife.

After this excitement his wife would settle down, and he would realise that happiness he longed for. Visions rose before him of cosy evenings in the library, when, with cheery fires and drawn curtains he would share with her those books he read and re-read with so much pleasure. She would by that time share his enthusiasm ; and this delightful vision of deferred hope gave him patience meanwhile.

She was passionately attached to him ; she had chosen him, and, if he could not give her quite as passionate an affection, he could honestly so order his life that she should never discover that he was himself not quite as devoted, or as much in love. Cyril required all his patience during the next few weeks. Not only was his house taken by storm by carpenters and workmen, but the whole household also appeared demoralised. Housemaids were encountered where he had never seen them before. Marsham and Mrs. Butt were evidently disapproving. His wife changed her plans ever so often.

Young men he knew nothing about, were rehearsing love scenes all over the place. At one moment the plays were to be pastoral and to take place in the park. Then heavy showers changed all the tactics. The billiard-room was turned topsy-turvy, and a stage was erected there. If he remonstrated about the noise, or the mess, or the presence of the strangers, his wife quite good-temperedly offered to give everything up, and by her extreme good temper made him feel a brute—and no man likes that.

Things went on in the same way for some time. Cyril did not like to see much of his aunt, because he was thoroughly loyal to his wife, and he was afraid that with Aunt Anne, without quite intending it, he might betray discontent. He knew well that words once uttered can never be recalled!

He was feeling particularly aggrieved the day before everyone was to assemble. He had gone to the stables to see a horse reported amiss, and the

important factotum at the head of the stables had made a distinct complaint, and of his wife.

"Too well-bred a servant, to say it in so many words, Tomkins regretted in a very pointed manner the fact of the horse being amiss at such an inconvenient moment. "Three times this morning, Mr. Burlington, has the brown mare been to town--had to go."

"Three times?"

"Three times: and the road new metalled in many places, sir, as you're aware."

"There must have been some mistake."

"There was not any mistake about his going, sir. Mrs. Burlington sent herself."

"Ah."

"Once was an order, and the other times was forgets. It's hard on the brown mare's legs, sir."

Cyril could only agree with him, but, of course, he could not discuss his wife's "forgets," or challenge her orders with the servants. He went straight home,

however, determined to say a word, kindly but firmly, about the unreasonable want of thought, and to point out that sending a horse six miles three times over was unjustifiable. He took a short cut to the house by the shrubbery, and as he walked along considerably ruffled, he heard something which ruffled him a good deal more.

"Of course, if you are so particular, it cannot be done," and the voice was the voice of the most objectionable young man.

"It is not only that," said Miss Hutchinson, "but my father and mother are so particular. The petticoats will be so short."

"They will be very short;" and the young man laughed merrily. "Luckily, our hostess does not mind."

"She is a dear! We were so afraid that Mr. Burlington would put his foot down."

"Would that make any difference? It seems to me that she is one of the happy few who does exactly as she likes."

"I don't know, but I believe if Mr. Burlington saw and disapproved (and I have an idea he would disapprove), Mrs. Burlington's dance and her dress and other things would be either given up or—modified."

"Possibly; I may say probably."

"And yet you wished me to take part? You are really horrid."

"If you choose to misunderstand me"—then the two voices died away.

Mr. Burlington had received a great shock. He had stated from the first that he had no talent for acting, and it had never occurred to him that he should have taken some interest in the play, and made himself acquainted with what was proposed to be acted.

What had that detestable young man said? "The petticoats would be very short." The way all had been said sent him hurrying in, vexed, anxious, worried beyond description, and in a mood absolutely

new to his wife, who had never seen him so roused, so excited, so angry, before.

He tried to speak quietly to control his voice, but failed. Maria, who was trying to tie a particular knot, looked up in surprise. "What is the matter? You look as if you had heard some bad news. Anything wrong?"

The contrast between her light way of questioning him and the deep annoyance he was smarting under made him more angry still.

"I have heard something about this tomfoolery that I do not like," he began, and his wife was startled by his tone.

"Meaning our play? What have you heard?"

"I have heard that your dress is—that it will be objectionable."

"Really! And may I ask who calls it objectionable?"

"I have heard it is to be short."

"I think it will be short; certainly."

"And you do not mind! You see nothing inde-

corous in you (a married woman) wearing very short petticoats before all the world?"

"The dress is in character; I am to be a peasant, and wear a peasant's costume."

"And dance?"

"Yes, certainly; and dance. What harm is there? You do not suppose that a Tyrolese peasant wears a gown down to her heels? It is very absurd of you to make all this fuss. Someone put it in your head, probably Aunt Anne."

"Aunt Anne has nothing to do with it. But I warn you that I will not allow you to make yourself talked about, or wear a dress all respectable people object to their daughters' wearing."

"All respectable people! Name, my dear Cyril—name one!"

"Mr. and Mrs. Hutchinson."

"Ah! they object. Did they say so?"

"No; I haven't seen them; but their daughter said so for them."

Maria stretched her arm out and drew her blotting-book towards her. She handed a note to her husband.

He took it and read it.

"My dear Mrs. Burlington,—My dear child is too shy to tell you herself, so I write to say that perhaps you are not aware how beautifully and gracefully she dances. As you may be at a loss for someone to perform *à la* Letty Lind, I mention this, and once you have seen her dance, you will allow that motherly prejudice has not led me to say one word more than is just."

"MARY HUTCHINSON.

"My girl would much like to act Zick's part; if not filled up, do give it to her."

Mr. Burlington stood feeling extremely helpless and a little ashamed of himself. But he tried to stick to his colours, and he reiterated "the dress is short, however."

His wife did not answer him. She felt so completely in the right that she did not wish to weaken her position by a single word.

He was much annoyed by her silence, which he

felt to be a rebuke. Then he shifted his ground and the brown mare's legs happily, or unhappily, came into his mind.

"Then there is that unfortunate horse," he said, and feeling quite sure of his ground now, he took a firmer tone. "I must really beg, Maria, that you will be more considerate. The horse was three times sent into the town to fetch things. Why not make a list and send for everything at once?"

"Exactly what was done, and done by me," said Maria, her eyes sparkling with sudden indignation."

"The coachman said that there was one order, and then things were forgotten."

"By whom?" Her voice was peculiar; surely she was not suppressing a laugh.

But Mrs. Burlington was trying hard not to laugh. For the first time Cyril was making himself ridiculous; and she could not help herself.

"My dear Cyril, the next time you bring a list

of grievances against me, you had better find out how much truth there is in them. I wrote a list; if the groom forgot things—if he went back for them it was done without my orders. All the same," she added, drawing herself up, "if I chose to send your whole staff to fetch things for me in my present emergency I should do it."

She looked at him with brilliant laughing eyes as she spoke. What could her husband say? What could he do? He stood gravely looking at her; he knew so little of women that he did not recognise that her laugh was nervous. She knew that this difference between them would end in defeating her or establishing her authority on a firmer basis, and she snatched her advantage before he had time to rally and take up his position.

"I forgive you, my dear Cyril," she said, patting his shoulder; "but for my sake try and not treat me to this sort of scene again. I really do not like you to——"

"You do not like me to feel annoyed with you," he said eagerly, trying to fill up the little pause she made, in a manner satisfactory to himself.

She arched her eyebrows in surprise. "That never occurred to me," she said, laughing out this time. "I was only going to say I did not like you to look ridiculous." She turned away, took up her ribbons, and went into her bedroom, still laughing, though in a more suppressed way.

Cyril had been put in the wrong, but this time it was particularly hard to bear, because he was conscious of having made a mistake. One mistake! It seemed to him that he did nothing but make mistakes. How was he ever to influence his wife, and why was it that there seemed to be such a wide difference in principles and all else between them? Then, with a sudden reaction he accounted for everything by the absence of that love which was, he was afraid, so much more on her side than his.

"If I loved her passionately, everything that irritates me now would perhaps charm me," he thought, sadly enough; and, as he remembered this, he resolved to be patient—only so could he make amends for a wrong he was conscious of having done her in marrying her.

CHAPTER X.

REHEARSAL.

THE days went on with all the usual amount of heartburnings, private mortifications, and petty jealousies which are the natural outcome of an ill-assorted company of amateur actors. But Mrs. Burlington's brilliant good humour never failed her. She seemed impervious to any remarks save those of a flattering nature, ignored any attempt at impertinence, and was evidently quite in her element. Every difficulty arose apparently only for her to overcome, and she certainly shone out under the existing chaos, always serene, gay, and in very brilliant

spirits. Cyril felt that they had drifted farther apart, but, all the same, privately gave her ungrudging admiration.

She had ready answers, and was never put to a disadvantage. She was so ignorant of the various political relations that her husband feared catastrophes, and then found that in her ignorance lay her safety. Those people who tried to say something unpleasant, and who talked of waste of time and dissipation, always got the worst of it—especially Lady Bridstone, who cherished a pet grievance dating from her very first visit.

“It is so good, so kind, so forbearing of your dear kind husband, Mrs. Burlington, to allow all this kind of thing! He must hate it. He looks very unhappy; not at all himself, poor dear!”

“No; he is not looking well,” answered his wife calmly; “he has had toothache for three days.”

“Oh! I thought all this hurly-burly was a worry to him. To some people a perpetual racket is so trying, so depressing!”

"I think dullness so much more depressing, and English country life is terribly dull. It is particularly dull to us—to women generally."

"I never feel dull."

"Do you not? What amusements do you have, then?"

"I do not consider amusements necessary. I have interests." And Lady Bridstone looked very imposing when she made this speech.

"Ah?" said Mrs. Burlington, negligently. "If you have interests... May I know what especially interests you?"

"Everything, more or less; but you think country life dull? I cannot understand it."

"I do not find it amusing. What is country life, as a rule, here? After breakfast people order dinner, and have five minutes interview with the housekeeper; read the slate; write one or two notes; saunter in the flower garden, and snip the withered heads off the rosebushes; work a little; look at the

paper, and wonder why one honest set of gentlemen pick holes in each other's speeches in such a remarkably rude way, and think it necessary to show the strength of their convictions by being extremely irate with everyone who disagrees with them; then lunch; perhaps a drive of several miles, to find everyone out, and be very glad of it; return home; visit some poor people, have tea, perhaps ride; dress and dine, and doze over picture-papers till bedtime . . . I call that a very dull life!"

"You have no interest in politics; I have."

"Mercifully I have no political convictions."

"Mercifully?"

"Yes. If I had I should differ entirely from my husband, and it is quite possible that we might quarrel."

"Ah!" breathed Lady Bridstone, who thought this a home thrust and given from malice prepense.

"Yes; we might quarrel. Now I do not mean to deny that a quarrel might be very amusing,

much more amusing than monotonous agreement, but it is not very nice. You see I am afraid I was born without enthusiasm."

"I should be grieved to think you mean what you say," and Lady Bridstone shook her elderly head till her front, which had seen better days, got slightly to one side. "Do you mean to say that if your husband stood for the county you would not be interested—that you would not endeavour to help him? Women can do so much in these days."

"They can also do mischief," answered Maria, with sudden gravity, looking full in the old lady's face.

Poor Lady Bridstone reddened. "I was talking about political influence. I wished to put before you in plain English, that you ought to feel an interest in your husband's election—in his success."

"But I should feel interested," answered Maria, with great animation. "It would be my one chance

of being again in London, and I adore London."

"Ah!" again said Lady Bridstone. "I am not sure that I think that a very exalted motive. No interest in politics, no interest in the history of our times. A mere frivolous existence, a life of pleasure..."

"How can any rational woman be really interested in the petty squabbles of the House of Commons?"

"But eloquence, my dear Mrs. Burlington!"

"Eloquence? Yes; but when a good speech is made I am always on that side of the question; I am so easily persuaded. But, as a rule, it is not eloquence. How can I feel interested in the usual sort of thing? The country is always said to be going to the dogs, and, somehow, never gets there; one set of men are praised for going to war, and the next year are blamed for the same thing. No; the House of Commons is an excellent institution; it is a safety-valve for all the bores, and there are so many! As in a hive drones exist, so in society

bores are an established fact. If they had no place to prose in, how terrible it would be for the wives!"

Lady Bridstone began to have a dim conviction that trying to argue with a young woman who was so utterly unlike any other young woman she had encountered, was not a success.

She turned the conversation to the play, and, Mr. Burlington coming in just then, she tried to show her annoyance with Mrs. Burlington by attempting to ignore her—a proceeding he saw through at once, and instantly defeated. Maria instinctively recognised his loyalty, and a sincere, if ephemeral, feeling of gratitude made her cordial to him.

Most unfortunately, her anxiety to rouse and startle Lady Bridstone made her say, "You are coming to see the play, I hope. Mr. Burlington is trembling a little about the verdict respecting my dress, or rather my petticoats. He is afraid they will be too short. Do you object to very short petticoats, dear Lady Bridstone?"

"I am not young enough to understand quizzing," said the old lady, immensely offended, and rising from her chair, and shaking her dress out as if unseen earwigs or other obnoxious insects were hanging to it.

"I am not quizzing." Maria looked at her husband, and saw that he was with difficulty suppressing annoyance. Still true to his wife, he said lightly, "There is some doubt as to the length of petticoats in a Tyrolese costume. My wife is afraid we may all be taken by surprise, and she is anxious to do nothing to cause any sort of disapproval."

Lady Bridstone looked from one to the other. She would like to have said something stinging to Mrs. Burlington, who had managed to ruffle her a great deal; but, as Mr. Burlington upheld her and stood by her, she was checked. By sympathetic sighs and an ardent pressure of her withered hand, she endeavoured silently to convey her sorrow for

his being so ill-matched, and her strong disapproval of his wife to her husband. When she was driving away she was conscious of having failed to disturb the serenity of either, and in her heart of hearts she admired that husband's loyalty.

But she went about everywhere, shaking her head, and pitying him so much and looking so sagacious that Lord Burleigh's momentous shake of the head in "The Critic" was nothing to it. Mrs. Burlington had made one dangerous enemy.

Cyril was so vexed that he was afraid of speaking just then to his wife. She was in a horribly false position. She did not know... and he felt that this would always be the case.

How foolish he had been in thinking that he could always influence her without explanations! And if he gave those explanations would it not destroy her spontaneous brightness, which was so distinctive a trait; and if her brightness went what would remain to her? He was moodily wandering

near the house when he was suddenly confronted by his aunt, and while he would not have sought her just then, he acknowledged that her presence was more grateful and delightful to him than almost ever before. In her long life Aunt Anne had never been known to take an unkind or uncharitable view of any one. Cyril was not afraid of himself. But, as he had not sought her, he was more at ease, and felt that his unacknowledged and almost vague discontent about his wife's proceedings need not be entered into.

During the last few weeks, busy and taken up as she had been with the excitement of all the coming play, Maria had never been too busy or too engrossed to go and see Aunt Anne, and indeed the liking between the two was increasing. Maria felt the charm of one whose ease of manner and cordial kindness made effort unnecessary; and, though she had occasional fits of pique and momentary spasms of jealousy if she fancied Aunt Anne's

influence outweighed hers, she was beginning to lean upon the elder woman's opinion, and to like nothing better than a talk with her. On her side Aunt Anne, who had private and secret reasons of her own for dreading the marriage, was soon won by the frankness and absolute straightforwardness of her new niece. She was so perfectly outspoken that, though the fearlessness might be the outcome of undue confidence in herself, it was a quality to be prized, and the brightness she brought with her was something new and refreshing to one who had suffered so long from the depressing effect of bereavement and solitude, and the absence of any close womanly friend to whom she might speak of those minor matters too small to be worthy of a man's attention. When Aunt Anne and Cyril met, therefore, just at this juncture, the Fates could hardly have done Maria a better turn.

"I was just coming up to see the dresses. Maria wished it."

This recalled a trouble, "I am sure I don't know what room you can see them in. The whole house is in confusion. There is not a place one can sit down in quietly."

"Ah, well, in three days now all will be over. I daresay being behind the scenes so much, you have grown tired of it all. Everything will be fresh and startling and new to me. I daresay you know all by heart."

"I hope there will be nothing startling," said Cyril. His tone was not very cheerful, and she was quick to see it.

"I see you are a little bored. Maria was afraid you were bored. My dear Cyril, how nice she is! It seems that some remarks about the dresses made her anxious for my opinion. I had a note from her begging me to come and see, and judge."

Cyril felt much ashamed. So while he had been disturbing himself his wife had been prudence itself. His answer was much more cheerful.

"I acknowledge that I am cross," he said. "I will say 'bored' if you like it. It certainly sounds better. There seems to me such an absurd amount of rehearsing. I can go nowhere without being made to feel I am in the way, and the people who spend their days here are not to my taste. There is Mr. Eccles. Have you ever met him or heard of him?"

"Never. Is he objectionable?"

"He is worse, if there is anything worse."...

"I am sorry, dear. I suppose, to do justice to the play, outsiders had to be allowed to take part. I am sure Maria is sorry also. What does she say about him? I suppose you told her you objected to him? It was probably too late."

Cyril was silent. This was exactly what he had not done. Indeed, his grievance was that his wife had not found out for herself that he objected so very much to this man—and other things.

He had not spoken, because he was hurt, and

also he dreaded that way Maria had of laughing off any serious cause of complaint. It irritated him, and somehow put him in the wrong; it made him look as though he was making a fuss about nothing.

Looking up, however, he saw that his silence was giving Aunt Anne a false impression, and his sense of right impelled him to speak.

"I have said nothing, . . . I thought she would see for herself."

"I would tell her," said Aunt Anne, gently. "I think, my dear Cyril, that in many ways your wife has been unfairly used. I have no right to interfere; no right, perhaps, to express an opinion; but I feel that a mistake has been made, especially with an open character like hers. Not by you, but by those who brought her up."

"I think so, too," answered Cyril, heartily; "but I cannot see my way to altering things now; and I hope that there will be no occasion."

They reached the steps leading into the library as he finished speaking, but his moodiness was gone. Nothing could have laid his fears at rest so much as that simple act told him by his aunt. His wife had asked her to judge about the propriety of her costume; and if she approved, what mattered it to him who disapproved? He would set her judgment against that of all the world.

CHAPTER XI.

WAS IT ALL SUCCESS?

THE eventful evening arrived. Dinner was advanced half an hour, in order that visitors and servants might have time to digest and prepare; the actors and actresses dined together apart at an earlier hour.

It must be confessed that Mrs. Burlington's absence made everything much less lively than usual. Her brightness and charm of manner were missed by her husband most, and by the others without their accounting for it. There are few events in life allowed to interfere with so important a daily occurrence as a man's dinner, and that on this occasion

this sacred meal was over some ten minutes earlier than usual was due more to the fact of Mrs. Burlington's absence than to any neglect of Mrs. Butt's good things.

There was much less conversation, because there was no one to originate things. Aunt Anne was at the head of the table once more, but her gentle manner was really a check upon the conversation of others. She had a pleading, low pitched voice, which was subduing in its influence. Other voices sounded almost aggressively loud contrasted with her extreme quietness, and, though a low, sweet voice is a "very excellent thing in woman," if all remarks reach a near neighbour only, general conversation is apt to languish. Cyril noticed this, and found the dinner longer and duller, and made a mental appreciative remark about his wife's way of drawing people out.

No one was more eager than he was for the play to begin and—end; and when all was ready, and

the overture was in progress, he was surprised by his own agitation. The play was, after all, pastoral. The evening was superb—still, calm, and warm. The play had been written for Mrs. Burlington by a great man; and nothing prettier could be conceived than the opening scenes—the many richly draped figures gliding through the trees; the flash of colour; the whole *mise en scène* was excellent.

The acting was very poor, with one exception—Mrs. Burlington. Her acting was more that of an accomplished professional than the performance of an amateur. Accustomed to see the best acting, and having taken part in private theatricals as a girl, she was quite at home, and won rounds of applause from all the disinterested spectators. She was supposed to be a Tyrolese peasant in the days when Austria was fighting that gallant little nation, and to be loved at the same moment by an Austrian soldier and a Tyrolese musician. To save her family from endless persecution and annoyance, she tries

to keep the soldier in good humour, and thus makes her lover jealous, and the famous dance was to please the Austrian and keep him out of the way while her father and lover were carrying out a secret march.

A well-made boarding covered with tightly stretched cloth had been placed on the grass for the actors to be secure against evening dew and damp arising. Mrs. Burlington's beautiful figure, her postures, and her dancing were all in turn admired with ungrudging enthusiasm. Even Cyril, prepared not wholly to approve, was carried away by the influence of her grace and the refined charm of all her gestures. Coloured lights were suddenly thrown over everything, and the success was complete.

Then Cyril suddenly had a shock. Old General Labbridare said to him, with enthusiasm, "You are, possibly, too young to have seen her; but, by Jove, sir, your wife, in figure, face, and action, is the exact image of that poor girl, Donella, who was

burned, you know. I never in all my life saw such a likeness."

"I suppose you mean that for a great compliment," said poor Cyril, with an attempt at a smile. "I suppose that was her professional name."

"I mean it as the greatest compliment. As to the name, poor Donella was an Irish girl; a nobody, a girl called Rourke, I think. But she had harder lines than most girls, poor little soul! "

Cyril wished and did not dare to ask more.

All was over. There was a confused rush of compliments and thanks—supper, where everyone appeared in their costumes, and where Mrs. Burlington, in brilliant spirits, was the life of the whole party. Lady Bridstone, who had been meditating how she could say something sarcastic all the evening, said clumsily: "Your acting is too good for an amateur, Mrs. Burlington. It is quite a pity you are not on the stage. You act almost as if you had been trained."

Cyril was near her, and was delighted when his wife took the remark in excellent part, and said quietly: "I hardly expected such generous, such ungrudging praise from you, Lady Bridstone. You are very kind."

The malicious old lady looked keenly at her, but could see only an open, candid face, and a pleased smile.

"She must be a born actress," she muttered to herself as she went off to the carriage. "I don't believe in a woman like that!"

Cyril went upstairs at length, expecting to find his wife tired out, and either undressing or undressed. But she was neither. She was standing, leaning against the open window. All the candles were lit in her room, and her figure looked radiant with all the gold embroidery, and the jewels about her throat. Her eyes were sparkling with indignation. "Cyril," she began in a direct tone, "I have been insulted to-night. Is it my fault? Did

you notice a very odious man called Eccles here, a man some one suggested could act, and who has been rehearsing here these last few weeks."

"Yes."

"He seized my hand, and began to make love to me. He—kissed my hand."

"He shall never enter these doors again," said Cyril, passionately.

"Just what I told him," she answered. "I said that the worst part of getting up a play in the country was that one never could secure gentlemen for all the parts." Tears were standing in her eyes. "Why did you not tell me the man was what he is, Cyril? Did you not know it?"

"I thought that you knew it also."

"Oh, Cyril!" She was keenly, desperately, hurt. "Did you give me credit for so little sense of right, so little anxiety for my own, for your, approval as to suppose that if I had guessed, if I had known—I should have allowed him to stay to act with us,

to be day after day thrown into our intimate society?" Words failed her. She was cruelly mortified. This, then, was what he thought of her. And all his love for her had not taught him to read her better.

At such a moment she had wanted him to soothe and comfort her. She was cruelly distressed. She had gone to him, and he received her so. Did he blame her? Did he suppose this insult was owing to some indiscretion on her part? This thought was so maddening to her that she rushed past him, intending to go out of the room till he had left it. But he stopped her. "Forgive me," he said, "if I have vexed you. But you have not noticed how the presence of that little cad annoyed me. I hated seeing him with you, and you failed to see it. How was I to know that you were not excusing him and putting up with him because of some latent talent which my dulness could not perceive? I own I thought you put the success of the play before

everything else—that you set it above every consideration.”

“And you do not see that this is what hurts me,” she said in a low voice. “To be so judged; to be thought capable——” They were nearer to each other at that moment than they had yet been. Then Maria asked him suddenly one question: “Why did you look so ill-pleased when old Lady Bridstone said flattering things?”

“Because she was trying to be impertinent. She meant to imply—She wished to insinuate that your dancing was too good—more like that of a professional than like that of a lady.”

Maria coloured hotly. “Had I only known!” she murmured.

“Had you known you would not have made the graceful little speech you did. You would not have made so effective an answer. Nothing is more mortifying than to take pains to say a spiteful thing and to see it fall wide of the mark!”

Maria was a little thoughtful. Then, facing him, she said, looking straight into his eyes, "Why were you in such a fever about my dress and my dancing? You disliked it, I saw. Why was it? Why should I not do what so many people do? What is the difference between me and others?"

Cyril grew hot and red. He was a bad hand at concealing his feelings, and yet a direct answer was impossible to him. His wife watched him anxiously. Then her countenance changed. Pride and determination gained a victory. Before he could again stop her she was gone, and this opportunity was lost, like many other opportunities. It had passed for ever!

CHAPTER XII.

A PIECE OF NEWS.

WHEN Mrs. Burlington left her room and her husband standing there, she was more nearly disliking him than she had ever been of hating any one in all her life! Instinctively she felt that at that moment she was offering him an opportunity, and that if he availed himself of it they would for ever after be more to each other than they had yet been. Wounded by an undeserved insult, she had gone to him in so softened a mood that she was prepared to lay down her arms, and be in love with what she considered the dulness of

the country and all else, had he answered her confidence and given her his own.

For the first time it came home to her that her power over him was not all she had imagined it to be. She had accepted cheerfully the idea that he adored her, and that he was content with what she could give him in return. Her ambitious thoughts, her aspirations, satisfied her; as long as he was there to countenance and support her in the background, his figure never came very prominently before her. But something now made her ask herself whether the position was exactly what she supposed it to be.

He never showed her any signs of the great affection she credited him with. He was always kind enough, but not enthusiastic; and if he had not been in love, why had he married her? Had she worn out his patience and killed his passion by showing so little regard for him?

He supported her at all times before the world,

and he was loyal; but he did not do justice to her powers; that was where he defeated her. She knew by instinct that he judged her dispassionately if not critically, and was this consistent with an overmastering passion? She resolved that in some way she would prove her ability and her capabilities, and he would be obliged to confess that he had underrated her.

Poor Mr. Burlington! He knew very little indeed of his wife's projects, and, had he known, what could he have done? For if a woman believes herself so capable, if she thinks she can dominate everyone, how is a man, tongue-tied by generosity, to undeceive her?

As regarded himself, he was so circumstanced that he could not be perfectly frank with her. There was one confidence that for her own sake he could never give her, and another that for his own he thought it wiser to withhold.

Mrs. Kingson had much to answer for!

As far as quiet and domestic happiness went, Mr. Burlington found that the recent excitement had apparently merely whetted his wife's appetite for gaiety. Each day some fresh neighbour was openly pressed to stay or dine. Indeed, Mrs. Burlington's object seemed to be never to have to encounter a solitary evening with her husband.

Even the curate, a long-suffering person of very gaunt appearance and decidedly lugubrious manner—even he was pronounced in Mr. Burlington's hearing "better than nothing."

"Are we never to be alone again?" he asked, with some natural irritation, when, for the fifth time in one fortnight, the long face of the Rev. Aubrey Tucker and his long figure were seen arriving.

"It is much better than boring each other. You know you do not appreciate my small talk, and lately, in the middle of quite an amusing story, you proposed teaching me chess."

"I did not think the story very amusing. Your

way of telling it was—I thought it—ill-natured.”

“Ill-natured! My dear Cyril, if every amusing story was sifted, how little would be left. Very often the only merit lies in the little embroideries custom sanctions . . . Mr. Tucker, you arrive at such an opportune moment! My husband and I are theorising about telling amusing stories. Often their only merit lies in the way they are told.”

“I am not precisely sure what you mean by stories. I take for granted you do not refer to facts; facts should . . . hem . . . remain facts,” said Mr. Tucker, heavily.

Mr. Burlington smiled sarcastically, and his wife understood the meaning of that smile. It was meant, she conceived, to be a sort of two-edged weapon, to say pointedly to her, first that this ponderous, dull, unappreciative man was the man whose society was to prevent a tête-à-tête with him, and also to remind her that, even judging by this standard, facts altered and embroidered ceased to be facts.

She was sensible by this time that a wide difference existed between her husband's standard of truth and her own.

But this knowledge did not disturb her or make her in the least unhappy. She allowed it, indeed, more as an apology for him than as an excuse for herself. It stood to reason that a man totally wanting in imagination must look upon everything with different eyes, and be blind to all except what was straight in front of him; and she piqued herself upon her power of seeing everything with all the side-lights, possibilities, and probabilities they were capable of having.

If things as she put them had not exactly occurred, there was no reason why they should not occur; and because she had not seen them, was that any reason why they should not exist, and have been seen by other people?

"I am not ill-natured, and I am not mischievous," she would say to her husband; "but if I see life

amusingly I am obliged to depict it amusingly. It is not in me to be prosaic."

His grave disapproval served no purpose. She had all along made up her mind that he was inferior in intellect, and she had one word which always served her—"unappreciative."

Mr. Tucker was a good, honest, worthy soul, whose greatest weakness was an anxiety to be known by his baptismal name of Aubrey, as a sort of set-off against that of Tucker, which he considered plebeian. He had been christened Aubrey after a distant connection, and he made the most of the fortunate circumstance. He put "The Rev. J. Aubrey-Tucker" upon his cards, and trusted people might give him the benefit of the first name, and that in time the "Tucker" might be altogether dropped.

All men have their weaknesses, even good men, and this shade of vulgarity brought its own punishment, and caused him to be well laughed at. Un-

fortunately, also, it set a good many people against him, and neutralised good he might have done. His presence on this particular evening annoyed Mr. Burlington even more than usual, and he grew more silent and more reserved each moment.

All at once, however, Mr. Tucker brightened up. He had some news to tell—something to impart which would give him consequence, however momentary.

“I heard some rather important news this evening before leaving home,” he began in his slow, rather thick voice.

Mrs. Burlington looked up with interest. “Pray tell us, Mr. Tucker. News is always very welcome.”

“You have heard of the Wyncotes of Wyncote Hundred?” He looked at her for a moment, and added, turning to his host, “You know them, of course; charming, delightful man; aristocratic son; of course, not being of our faith, I do not know them; that is, only by hearsay. Then that sad story

of the brother who murdered a man and died before he could be tried makes them interesting.

Mrs. Burlington listened with immense interest to this confused account of neighbours she longed to know about. She wished above everything to hear something which would explain Cyril's antagonism.

"What about them?" asked her husband curtly, almost rudely, she thought.

"They arrived—that is, the son arrived yesterday."

"Well, what of that?" asked Mr. Burlington, the subject so palpably displeasing to him that the curate looked up in surprise.

Before he had time to make any rejoinder, Mrs. Burlington said, "Of course, you will call, Cyril? Our nearest neighbours, you know?"

"I cannot see why the accident of having adjoining properties necessitates making acquaintance with people I disapprove of."

Mrs. Burlington was very much surprised.

Then it occurred to her that perhaps something

about his family, that he did not wish to have known, made him determine she should not make the acquaintance. More to startle him than to annoy him, she said laughing, "You see Mr. Tucker, in all families there is a skeleton hidden somewhere; it seems to me that Wyncote Hundred holds a secret of some kind and a skeleton."

Mr. Tucker was quite certain that she had said something witty, and answered, "That settles the point."

"Which point do you consider settled?" asked Mrs. Burlington, laughing. "You have spoken like an oracle, and have carefully avoided answering to the point."

"I am afraid I am not a judge. If I marry, which is not likely, I suppose I shall know all these little social things and about skeletons. At present"—He looked so sincerely unhappy that Mr. Burlington, not without a shade of triumph in his tone, turned the conversation, and the iniquitous

opposition of a refractory churchwarden kept the guest in full talk till Mrs. Burlington slipped away. Her husband had expected that the advent of the Wyncotes, and a discussion about them would have begun as soon as they were alone together; but, much to his relief, nothing was said. Apparently, her interest in them had expired, and he was in expressibly relieved and thankful.

He knew little of womankind and less of his wife. From the moment Maria knew they were there, she was resolved upon making their acquaintance, and her silence was caused by a conviction that a discussion would bring on an absolute prohibition against going to see these people, or making their acquaintance; and though she was prepared to do a great many independent things, she was not quite prepared to do anything in the very face of a direct prohibition.

Within a few days came exciting political news. There was to be a dissolution. The news took

everyone by surprise, and Mrs. Burlington heard so many different opinions, and noticed that such a keen interest was taken in the coming elections, that she began to see that political life was more interesting than she had imagined. Then, in the very thick of it all, came a requisition to her husband to contest their division of the county.

Mr. Burlington, who had his own convictions, thought seriously enough over his answer. A year ago the answer would have been easy. Then it would have been a negative. To exchange the freedom of his life for the House of Commons, and his quiet home life for the turmoil of London, would have been especially hateful to him. But things were changed. His home life now was a great disappointment to him. His wife could enter into none of his tastes, and neither share his pleasures, nor live his life. Every day showed him this more clearly.

Alone, she was silent, openly bored, and short-

ened her day as much as possible by breakfasting in bed, and retiring very early, and leaving him to read and smoke by himself every evening. It was exactly as it used to be—only without Aunt Anne's sympathising presence.

The arrival of the dullest neighbour, however, would turn Mrs. Burlington from silence to speech, and from dulness to brilliancy. It did not seem to matter much who it was so long (Mr. Burlington thought bitterly) as it was not her husband! As he was disappointed in his domestic life, it was natural that political life should look like a providential opening. No man with any brains, any energy, resigns himself to disappointment. A reaction, a hope of something to interest and to make up for it, drives many men into action. It made Mr. Burlington a politician.

Another thing weighed with him. If he was returned, as everyone assured him would be the case, it would place them in London during the

time the Wyncotes spent in the country ; and he wished to avoid these people.

To talk everything over with Aunt Anne was natural enough. But a difference of opinion had arisen between them, and this spoiled the pleasure a good deal, because, while allowing her wishes—her entreaties were impossible—he could not deny their justice.

For the first time in his life Cyril Burlington saw the right mode of action. His duty lay straight before him, and yet he could not bring himself to do it. Of course, Mrs. Burlington took advantage of the situation, and filled the house. She was always at her best when she had an audience, especially if it was what she called an appreciative audience. But she was quite unconscious of one fact. It made her happy to shine and to be the central figure of all the various arrangements. She did not take into consideration that there were other women who also liked to shine, and who made no

secret among themselves of their discontent and disapproval at being put in the shade.

Among those invited to stay with them now was a certain widow, Lady Rhodes, who described herself as a "free lance" and was dreaded a little, a good deal made of, and was one of the people who could never be passed over—at any rate with impunity. She had such a caressing manner that it was some time before people found out that she was capable of doing the most ill-natured things. She was not good-looking, but she put on her things well, and took the line of being "nobody in particular."

She put herself, as it were, humbly at the feet of any one she wished to conciliate, and was always offering to do small services for them. "Let me get it for you; I like running about," were words often uttered, and she had a way of saying "Dearest Mrs. So-and-so" which was very "fetching," to use a word often applied to her. By degrees people

found out that she was capable of thwarting the very plans she had encouraged, and when she found out that any real service was required from her, or that the people she had flattered were not likely to do her any good turn, it was wonderful how quickly she became too much occupied to see them, and how suddenly they were dropped.

But Mrs. Burlington had this and many other things to learn, and she was charmed with Lady Rhodes. In her she thought she had found that desirable thing—a friend who would openly assert her superiority, and one to whom she could speak frankly and openly. All her life she had wished for some one older than herself to whom she might turn for that full comprehension she imagined her husband incapable of.

“Dearest Mrs. Burlington,” said Lady Rhodes as she nestled down upon the sofa and patted the luxurious cushions into comfortable shapes, “do tell me all about everything—the play, the election, and

all else. I was dreadfully sorry I could not come to the play. I was away, and could not be spared. The dear Duchess made such a point of my being at Overcove. You know them all?—such a delightful family; so intellectual, so clever, so bright.”

“No, I do not know them.”

“Ah! it will all come. I myself... How they would appreciate you! A place—when you are *quite* at home in it—you feel you would not exchange for any other. Even I am, somehow, different there. The dear Duchess has a knack of putting you on such good terms with yourself. I should love seeing you there!”

“You are very kind,” said Maria, cordially. “I wish you had been here, and seen the play. It was very pretty, and supposed to have been a great success.”

“I was sure it was a success, the moment I heard people trying to invent ill-natured stories about it. I knew it had been a success, and said so.”

"Did people invent ill-natured stories?" asked Maria, who rose to this, as a woman of the world would never have done.

"Dearest Mrs. Burlington! of course they did; did you ever know of a very popular person without detraction, or a great success that was not followed by ill-natured comments?" And Lady Rhodes laughed a merry, enjoyable laugh.

"I suppose that it would not be fair to ask what was said?"

"It can do you no harm. It was only about your petticoats. They were said to be short." She fixed her eyes upon a china vase full of brown chrysanthemums, and rose to look at them.

"Such a lovely colour, and so artistically arranged," she said. "Needless to ask who adjusted them!"

She sank back again upon the cushions, and again pulled and patted them into shape.

"How I envy you the conservatories and houses

here, dear Mrs. Burlington," she said, in an affectionate tone.

Maria hardly heard her. "The petticoats were not short," she said.

"Oh, you are actually dwelling upon that silly gossip. Of course I know that; that was contradicted at once. I wish I had not told you. You see, I am so terribly impulsive. It is very stupid to repeat these things; pray think no more about it, dearest Mrs. Burlington. Everyone who knew your husband knew——"

Maria laughed as usual. Whenever she was a little nervous or annoyed she could not help herself. But, though this habit was annoying at times, nothing could have happened more distinctly discomfiting to Lady Rhodes at the present moment.

"I am glad that you take it that way, dear Mrs. Burlington."

"I cannot help it," said Maria, laughing still. "The petticoats—those petticoats—my petticoats

seem to have got upon everybody's brain! Provincial brains are apparently incapable of understanding that if you attempt to represent a class you must dress as they dress."

"Yes," said Lady Rhodes, ambiguously; "the question really is whether that particular character is suited to the—shall I say?—dignity of the person who assumes it. After all, as I said before, when envious detractors arise it only shows how great the success must have been. Yours, my dearest Mrs. Burlington, was such a success!"

Maria was too much flattered by this reiterated assurance to perceive the innuendo. As a rule, she saw with remarkable slowness any doubtful speech, and passed through life happily unconscious of many little stings her *aplomb* and visible self-satisfaction with herself were apt to provoke. If, eventually, she did perceive what was meant, her resentment was great but momentary. The balm of her own convictions healed any wound given. But

until now she had not provoked much adverse criticism. People forgive in an inexperienced girl what they resent in a married woman who has had her day. But a young married woman in the country who likes to monopolize the first place, and to betray her vanity, meets with little mercy at the hands of other women who are driven out in the cold, and who fancy she is taking an ungenerous advantage of her position.

Lady Rhodes began to study her "dear Mrs. Burlington," and found the study extremely amusing. Never was any one more easy to read; never did any one lay her thoughts and wishes more openly to her gaze. At the end of one week Lady Rhodes knew her thoroughly.

CHAPTER XIII.

ABOUT POLITICS AND OTHER THINGS.

BESIDES Lady Rhodes, there were a few men, a sprinkling of country neighbours, and a few people Maria considered uninteresting, who gathered round the future member at this juncture, and were staying in the house.

Mr. Burlington was, in his own quiet way, a man who, once he had undertaken a thing, became really interested in its success. While nothing can be more painful than the stumbling attempts of a speaker who has not the gift of speaking in public, so nothing is pleasanter than to hear a good speaker

who possesses not only words, but also that power of placing his ideas clearly and convincingly before the world.

Mr. Burlington, who was a reserved man (and was often miscalled a shy one), was never carried away by his convictions. He spoke quietly, but was evidently in earnest. And real earnestness—the belief in what he said, the confidence in the justness of his cause—communicated itself to his hearers.

His wife, who had never had a very high opinion of his abilities, testified her great surprise in his success as a speaker, in a way which was hardly flattering. But Cyril had learned never to expect her to show enthusiasm in his direction, and tried to see every merit in her openness, even when that openness was distasteful to him. Maria had insisted upon going to hear him address the electors at a preliminary meeting; and, finding the room hot, she left it and made her way by herself to the

outer door, where she waited till the function was over. A crowd of the usual description was standing about; and one near her, seeing she had come out of the building, asked her in a familiar tone who was speaking. "Mr. Burlington," she said in a dignified manner, meant to check his forwardness.

"Mr. Burlington? He may save his breath, then. He'll not get in. He's none for us!"

"Why not?" she asked, much surprised.

"For many good reasons. For one thing, we want a man who's married a born lady, and not a dancing miss."

At that moment the meeting broke up. Mr. Burlington saw his wife's pale face, and hurried her into the carriage, much disturbed by her paleness. He was so satisfied that it was the heat that he asked her no questions. But he was much surprised when she clung to his arm on reaching home, and hurried him upstairs with her. He was still more surprised when she faced him with an

agitation quite foreign to her, and said, solemnly:

"Cyril, that unlucky, that detestable play has lost you your election!"

"My dear child, are you out of your senses?" he cried; "what in the world do you mean?"

"What I say. The people—the crowd have heard some exaggerated account of my dancing, and said they wanted a man who had married a born lady, and not a dancing miss!"

Cyril turned pale and red by turns. "I knew it would vex you," said his wife. "I am so sorry; I am so distressed! I wonder, knowing, as you must have known, the strong feeling about it that evidently exists here, you did not urge me to give it all up."

Her husband looked at her in blank surprise. Had she really forgotten? Had he not made it clear to her how strongly he was against this acting, and how steadily she had borne down his opposition and triumphantly carried her point?

"You were so anxious to carry it out?" he said

at length; "my objections seemed to you old-fashioned and even unkind."

He spoke with suppressed excitement in his tone. He knew well that the reference she had heard carried a different meaning.

"I advise you to rest, and come down to dinner fresh this evening."

She was by this time in tears. "I cannot go down and face everyone to-night."

"I wish you would, and avoid any ill-natured comments." He spoke very anxiously.

"Why is one obliged to think of these sorts of things?" she said, pettishly. "It seems to me that here in the country every movement I make is of consequence. People talk of the freedom of a country life; I cannot see it."

How could he explain things to her? At that moment there was a gentle knock at the door, and Lady Rhodes's voice, full of purring amiability, was heard: "Dearest Mrs. Burlington, can I be of use? Are you ill?"

"My wife is upset by the heat," said Mr. Burlington; "she is resting, and will be all right presently." He went to the door, and opened it a little as he spoke.

"I am so relieved. Quite a horrid, wicked story of her having been insulted was told to me by someone. One of the Wyncotes, I think. I am glad it is nothing."

As her retreating footsteps died away, Mr. Burlington said to his wife: "Say nothing to anyone of what you heard. It is best."

"Very well," said Maria, who was much subdued; "and I will get up. Cyril," she exclaimed, holding him as he was leaving her sofa, "if... if you lose the election, will you ever forgive me? Why did I insist on dancing that thing?"

Cyril put a strong constraint on himself. "If it was only that!" he thought. "And the Wyncotes..."

"I will forgive you, poor child," he said; but the constraint he put upon himself made his voice sound

cold, and Maria heard the coldness, and spoke no more.

"I suppose it is too much to expect a man to forgive?" she said to herself when he had gone. And once more an opportunity was lost and another misunderstanding had arisen.

Maria's face betrayed little of either illness or annoyance when she appeared just before dinner. Her eyelids were a little heavy, but this merely softened the brilliancy of her eyes. Lady Rhodes, who looked at her curiously, was completely baffled. She attempted to make somewhat of an invalid of her after dinner, but was laughed at in a good-humoured way, and had not a single opportunity for confidence given to her. As she sipped her coffee, and carefully imbibed the sugar¹ left at the bottom of her cup, she was revolving in her own mind how she could discover the weak spot which she knew existed in all feminine armour.

If Mrs. Burlington had been wounded in any way the effect had been to drive her closer to her hus-

band's side, and make her turn to him for comfort. It was evident that a good understanding existed between them, and that "the rift within the lute" (which can never be mended) was far from both at present.

Not that Lady Rhodes wished actual dispeace, she only wanted to find some way of shaking Mrs. Burlington's calm self-complacency. It seemed so tiresome to her that a woman she considered so superficial, should glide over the surface of things, and apparently enjoy every minute of her life, when there existed a thousand reasons why she should be ruffled and have her serenity disturbed.

Mrs. Burlington was so overflowing with prosperity that she was an irritating spectacle to anyone who, like Lady Rhodes, was not all prosperous. There was something a little aggressive in it to many people; and Lady Rhodes, who let nothing escape her, was bent upon planting some thorn, however small, in her flesh. It is wonderful how quickly

one woman bent on mischief pieces things together to the disadvantage of another woman. Lady Rhodes knew nothing positively, but surmised much. She longed to rouse Mrs. Burlington's placid feelings, and to put her more on a level with other women. In one of the short lulls which even in a very cheerful society obtain occasionally, Mrs. Burlington caught a name new to her, "Marcia Dorington." The name struck her, and she remarked it. "An original, pretty name," she said, standing up and presenting a very pretty well-shod foot to the fire by leaning it on the low fender.

"A very original and extremely pretty girl, at any rate," said Lady Rhodes, meaningly—so meaningly that Maria looked up, and, following her mocking gaze, saw a visible flush on her husband's face. As she was not in love with him, of course, it could not be jealousy, and yet she was conscious of a distinct feeling of annoyance.

"Is she a friend and neighbour?" she asked, speaking

to everyone generally, but looking at her husband.

There was a little buzz, and she could not catch her answer. Everyone appeared to speak at once but there seemed to be a wonderful unanimity, at any rate.

"Such a popular girl!"

"Wonderfully clever!"

"Very brilliant!"

These words of commendation echoed all over the room.

"How strange!" said Mrs. Burlington, "that a girl whom everyone here seems to know and to admire so much, is one I have never till now heard mentioned."

"She has been abroad," said Mrs. Leigh, who was the wife of an influential supporter of her husband's.

"But it is curious," said Lady Rhodes, with a malicious little laugh. "Perhaps it is a tender subject."

"Was she, is she a particular friend?" said Maria, turning more directly to her husband in her usual perfectly straight-forward way.

"She is a friend—she is my friend, and I hope will be yours," he answered quietly, and the matter ended there as far as those present could see. But Lady Rhodes had not laughed in that pointed way in vain. Do what she would, a vexatious image of Marcia Dorington came frequently to disturb the young wife's mind.

With all her self-possession, she was conscious of deficiencies, and the idea of "a perfect woman, nobly planned," was not a joy to her. This girl had known Cyril much longer than she had. If she was so fascinating, so full of perfection, why had he not proposed to her? And what did that flush upon her husband's face signify. This perplexing idea made her more silent than usual.

She was roused by a question put by Lady Rhodes—a question she seemed herself to answer

in a breath: "Are you very tired, dear Mrs. Burlington? I am sure you are—I know you are!"

"Yes; I am tired," acceded Maria, rousing herself still more.

"No wonder; such a long day; so much to do! I often think what a tax it must be upon you to have so many to think of, so many to arrange for. And you do it all so well!"

"There is, of course, a great deal to do," said Maria, unsuspectingly. "My husband helps me all he can."

"Ah! but he is more accustomed to it," Lady Rhodes remarked, lightly.

"Of course; he has some years more of experience."

Maria was still unsuspecting, and attached no importance to Lady Rhodes's words. But something in her tone brought Mr. Burlington to her side. He came, however, so quietly that only his wife noticed him.

"I heard such a good anecdote of a certain Court lately," suddenly said Lady Rhodes, with marked impertinence in her manner and waving her fan about in a peculiar way, thereby fixing everyone's attention on her words. "The reigning prince married much beneath him; a pretty parvenu. The fact was sad, but had to be acknowledged, and the princess held receptions, and gave balls, and so on. Of course everybody went. Nobody can afford to offend a reigning prince. After a long reception one day, the princess threw herself into an arm-chair, and complained of fatigue. Just like you, dear Mrs. Burlington, she said how tiring it was, etc., etc., to her sister-in-law, the Prince's sister. 'How you can stand it I do not know,' she said. 'I am dead beat!' 'Ah?' said the sister-in-law. 'I was born to it.' Clever, was it not, and so true?"

"And where is the point of the story?" asked Mr. Burlington, quietly. "Who is the parvenu in this case?"

Lady Rhodes bit her lip. "I never saw you, dear Mr. Burlington. You gave me quite a start."

"Did I? Pray finish your story. I want to hear how it all ended."

But Lady Rhodes was baffled, and it was most provoking to see Mrs. Burlington's unruffled composure.

"Is she a wonderfully good actress, or does she really know nothing?" Lady Rhodes asked herself, as she watched her hostess turn with a smile to some one, and agree to sing.

And she did sing with an unwavering voice, which was clear and well-trained, though perhaps not sympathetic.

The guests were going next day, and it was Lady Rhodes's very last chance. She was resolved to say something in some way to upset the equanimity of the woman she was beginning to hate, because she could not put her down. Watching her opportunity when billiards were in progress, she once more began her attack.

"What curious things names are," she said. "Your maiden name, Mrs. Burlington—Kingson, was it not? What an odd derivation that must have had. By the way, Kingson was the name, was it not?"

"Yes; of course," answered Maria, quietly. "My name was Kingson. I asked my uncle once whether he had any theory about it, and he laughed and said that son of a king spoke for itself. You see I am evidently royally descended." She laughed herself at her speech, and added, "I must live up to my name."

"How strange," said Lady Rhodes; "I always understood you were an adopted daughter."

"That is equally true," answered Maria, "My dear uncle did adopt me. But I am his brother's child. I may say that few orphans ever had a happier home; I was never allowed to miss my father or mother."

"That is quite touching," said Lady Rhodes in

so altered a tone that Maria looked round to see the cause.

Her husband was coming to invite them to play pool.

"I think mine is a quaint name—Rhodes. I am sure no one ever heard of a single thing in connection with it," said Lady Rhodes, carelessly.

"I have!" said one of the girls present, who was considered frivolous, and who was delighted to have a chance of asserting herself, however mildly. "The Colossus of Rhodes."

Lady Rhodes reddened angrily, and affected not to hear, as she sauntered back to the billiard-room.

"Why did that trifling speech annoy her?" asked Mrs. Burlington in a low voice of the young lady.

"Because, my dearest Mrs. Burlington," said the delinquent, exactly in the voice of Lady Rhodes, "her feet are colossal, and a society paper insinuated as much. Please do not look vexed."

"I am vexed," answered Maria, candidly. "I

confess I dislike personalities. I do not think this sort of thing in good taste."

"And what, in the world, has she been doing all this time; what has she been saying to you? Have you really not seen how hard she has tried to be impertinent to you? We all saw it."

"I saw nothing," answered Mrs. Burlington. But a flash of consciousness came to her, and the heightened colour on her cheek and her erect bearing spoke for itself.

But to Lady Rhodes she showed nothing. An increased courtesy kept her more at a distance, and when she said "good-bye" next day that lady had the mortifying conviction that not one single arrow she had shot had taken effect. Apparently, not one had hit its mark.

CHAPTER XIV.

CRABBROOK HALL.

AMONG those country neighbours of whom Cyril Burlington—now that politics were in question—was apt to see a good deal more than of old, was Sir Henry Beryl. Sir Henry was a type of one of the old-fashioned country squires, whose lives were passed among their tenantry, and whose visits to London were visits only, and not prolonged beyond the two or three weeks necessary to see what was going on, renew acquaintance with old friends, and pay his respects to his sovereign. These deeds performed, he turned his back upon the metropolis

with increasing satisfaction every time he went there. His property was so large that he was some miles from most of his neighbours, but his place, Crabbrook Hall, was so situated that he was in the very centre of the county. He was as hospitable a man as ever lived, and he considered that, being placed where he was, his duty was (it was certainly his pleasure) to bring those neighbours on either side together who had few opportunities of meeting in any other way.

He was well off and liberal; he had many children of all ages. His elder daughters married, and left him. His eldest son married, and that marriage was the one drawback to Sir Henry's happiness. For young Mrs. Beryl had no children, and there was great unhappiness in the home of his son and heir not only on that account, but also from another cause. This cause was one Sir Henry himself could not condone. And, in a measure, he took blame to himself.

But he was too hopeful a man, and much too even tempered, to be depressed at all times by anything under the sun. It was only now and again, when circumstances pressed the position of affairs upon his notice, that his face grew grave, and his buoyant spirits were subdued.

Young Mrs. Beryl—pretty, fair, gentle, an heiress, and well-born—had attacks of insanity, and the reproaches that Sir Henry showered on himself were that he had been so anxious for the marriage, that he had promoted and urged it, and, though it was iniquitous of her people to make no sign and to allow the marriage, still he ought to have made fuller inquiry, and not to have been led by his own great anxiety to urge no delay.

For several years now young Mrs. Beryl had grown worse. For many months the young people's home had been virtually broken up, and, though the actual facts of the case were not paraded before the world, they were generally known. All this

was sad enough, but a greater trial came to poor Sir Henry. In the prime of life, full of all the pleasant ways he inherited from his father, and with much of his dead mother's beauty, Charlie Beryl had so grieved at first that he was sent abroad to travel, much, it may be said, against Sir Henry's wishes.

Like most Englishmen going abroad for the first time when over thirty, and with a most imperfect knowledge of languages, Charlie was only too much pleased to make one of a party from his own country and who had the same tastes and predilections as himself. It was a terrible misfortune that one of the party was Marcia Dorington, and that she had heard nothing of the Beryls, and knew nothing about young Beryl's wife. She had not the slightest idea he was married—no one ever alluded to his wife—and the friends she was traveling with lived so far from Crabbrook, and the sad story had been kept so quiet, that no one had more than a vague idea of the circumstances.

There was that tinge of sadness and melancholy in Mr. Beryl's handsome face that, with the subdued manner of one who had known something of sorrow, made Mr. Beryl very attractive to a girl of Marcia's temperament, who, like most warm-hearted, good-natured girls, had the instinct, the genuine instinct, of wishing to console.

Mr. Beryl imagined that everyone in his neighbourhood knew his story. On his side, therefore, no particular blame could be attached. And poor Marcia! . . . For the first time in all her life she fell in love, and, it may be added, she did not take the disease mildly.

When she found that her days were dull if Charlie Beryl had not been there, and that he was each day becoming the centre of all her hopes and wishes, she gave him credit for the same hopes, the same aspirations as she had.

It was at that time that Mr. Burlington became mixed up with the story. For so much of truth

lay in Lady Rhodes's insinuation that he had been thrown a good deal with her, and at a very important moment—at a great crisis of her life—he had been there.

Marcia was a desirable wife for very many reasons, and was one of the girls that the friends of a young man were most likely to point out to him as such—of course, as a rule, thereby defeating their own wishes. Even Aunt Anne had, in her own very quiet, gentle way, said something to her nephew, and he had heartily agreed to all her commendations, and allowed the matter to rest there, somewhat to her sorrow. When he found his friends at Vevay some instinct told him exactly how things were, and, putting his own disappointment out of the question—and he was disappointed—he was very much troubled and perturbed.

With all the keen insight of a man who was himself in love, he saw the two drifting into a hopeless passion, and he was convinced that one

was in ignorance of any impediment, and that the other was blind to what was patent to others—his own increasing passion.

Like other men, Mr. Beryl thought that, because he knew that any tie was an absolute impossibility, other people must know it also, and that because he knew it he could not fall in love, and gave his passion every other name.

Mr. Burlington was a reserved man, and most essentially a man who hated interfering in other people's affairs. Enough of his own admiration had been patent to Marcia to make him sensitive in the matter of telling her the truth. Was it not likely that she might fancy that he spoke from a motive which he honestly considered one that could not be attributed to him? And in this way would he not fall lower in her eyes? And, though she gave him no encouragement, she was one in whose eye he desired to stand well.

For a long time—indeed, for many days—Cyril

Burlington debated the subject in his own mind; and during long nights he resolutely put himself upon one side and thought of her and of her good only. Too much credit need not be given him, because his was a nature that could not continue offering up incense at a shrine that never would use it; and after a day where he had seen much that disturbed him his resolution was taken. To Charlie Beryl he felt that he could say nothing. If he spoke he might betray Marcia's secret, and he was convinced that up till now Charlie was blind. He could not be the one to do what was so undesirable; he could not open his eyes. But as to Marcia. . . He thought the opportunity good one evening. They had all been boating, and he was going away next day. This would be pleasanter for her, for once he had spoken she might resent it, and might withdraw even the calm measure of approbation which she bestowed, and which he valued.

"Miss Dorington," he began, in a voice he tried hard to make indifferent, "I have for some time wondered whether you knew poor Charlie Beryl's story. You are—interested in him?"

There was a little start of surprise, and then Marcia said, almost but not quite in her natural voice, "Of course, I am interested in him. Has he a story?"

"A very, very sad story."

"You do not take me quite by surprise. He has a very melancholy face."

"You know his marriage is such a terrible thing, poor fellow," said Cyril, bravely, speaking in a matter-of-fact voice, and even in the gathering twilight keeping his eyes away from her face. There was a silence for a few seconds, during which Marcia's breathing became audible; then she said, in a neutral voice, "Yes," and again there was another pause.

"His wife showed symptoms of insanity very soon after the marriage, and lately, indeed for many

months, she has been much worse. You probably know the story. So I hardly know why I should dwell upon it."

"But I know!" said Marcia, in a low voice; "and it is kind, it is brave of you to tell all this to me! Why, oh why, did no one——"

"Everyone thought you knew; he thinks so. I was not sure. Forgive me! but I was not sure whether you knew."

"Forgive you! I thank you!"

Marcia stood still. She laid her hand on her throat, as if her lace handkerchief oppressed her.

Cyril stood beside her. He knew she was as far from him as ever, but she had not misunderstood him. He did not realise that unworthy motives do not originate in pure and noble minds. It was with a fine gesture that the girl turned at last to say "Good-bye." She laid her hand upon his, and said, in a low voice: "All my life I will thank you for having shown yourself my friend! No one

need know that you told me this." In another moment the darkness hid her from his sight. Was it fancy, or did the soft wind bring the sound of a sob to his ears?

He followed her in his thoughts, and he tried to fancy what it would have been had she known all this at first.

It happens sometimes that two people meet, and find out that they met too late. Cyril did not deceive himself, however. He knew that henceforward she would see little of Charlie Beryl, but that she would probably never care in *that* way for any other man. What was left him now was to keep her secret, which he did loyally. That night how he admired her! There was no perceptible difference in her manner to Charlie. She was apparently her usual self—gay, bright, and taking her full share in the conversation going on. And then next day Cyril went away, and for some months they never met.

When, however, they did meet, the secret be-

tween them drew them very naturally together. When Lady Rhodes tried to insinuate that there had been something—a flirtation—a love affair—between them she was wrong. But Cyril was half afraid that in some way she had heard the truth. He was so full of this fear that he never imagined that any explanation was expected by his wife; he had still less an idea that she was capable of being jealous. He had been assured by her people (who ought to know) that her attachment to him was making her unhappy; he knew now that it could hardly have been as vehement as was supposed, for it certainly was not distressingly so at the present time, and jealousy to his very masculine understanding could not possibly exist without passion, vehement or otherwise.

He was, therefore, very far from imagining that Lady Rhodes had raised an uncomfortable sensation in his wife's mind, and that his flush had deepened the impression.

He thought of Marcia sometimes with that respectful feeling with which a man sees a woman act well in difficult circumstances. It was impossible for him to hold back from doing a thing, however disagreeable, if he felt it his duty to do it. But, conscious of the admiration he had for her, he wanted the assurance—he wanted her assurance that he had done right, and her thanks had been very comforting to him. It would, indeed, have been galling to him to have been made to feel that his interference was uncalled for, though he knew he would have been allowed to know this with all kindness.

It was breakfast time, and the husband and wife were seated *tête-à-tête*, reading their letters. Maria looked up suddenly with much animation.

“Here is a kind invitation from Sir Henry Beryl. A small party. That does not matter. Cyril, of course we can go?”

“What time does he ask us to go?” Cyril looked up from his own letter and gave her his attention.

"On the 25th. Of course we can go."

"I am afraid," Cyril began, but his wife interrupted him, "Now, Cyril, do not be disagreeable! What a break in the country stagnation; and I am dying to meet the more distant neighbours."

"I am afraid you will find it a little dull there. It is most kind of Sir Henry. He asks few people to his house, poor old man!"

"Why?"

Cyril hesitated a little. Maria was up in arms at once. "Oh, if it is another State secret," she said, gathering her letters together and preparing to leave the room.

"What State secret are you alluding to," asked Cyril, in genuine surprise.

"Oh, you know. I find these things out for myself," she said, drawing her head up. "I will only say one word—Marcia. Is that enough?"

Cyril was so completely taken by surprise that he let her go.

In a moment she looked into the room again, and said, "I am going to accept this invitation all the same."

"Do so," he said, coldly.

What had she found out, and how much of the real story did she know?

Had Lady Rhodes put things together and told her surmises as facts?

He was afraid of hearing what he held as a sacred confidence discussed by his wife. He knew that, as regarded himself, he had not breathed the story to a living soul.

Had Marcia taken some one into her confidence, and had her confidence been betrayed?

This was unlikely. Maria, having thrown confusion into her husband's stronghold, was aggressively triumphant. No cross purpose was ever more complete.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Burlington imagined that she had at length discovered a flaw in her husband's

armour. She was longing to meet Marcia and to let her see for herself how well she could hold her own. She was longing to see her for many reasons, and tried to find out where and when they were likely to meet. In a tone of studied indifference she said to Cyril, "I suppose your friend, Miss Marcia Dorington, will be at Crabbrook. She knows them intimately, does she not?"

"Yes, they are friends of long standing. But your meeting her there is most unlikely. Nothing is more unlikely."

He spoke with some heat, annoyed by her persistent allusion to Marcia.

And Mrs. Burlington said to herself, "That is it. They will, of course, not invite his old love to meet me."

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE BERYLS'.

THERE is nothing fairer than a beautiful English landscape on a lovely day. Crabbrook was an ideal place. It looked what it was—the ancestral home of a family in whose hands it had been for many generations. It was impossible not to notice the way in which the magnificent timber had been allowed fair play, or the variety of trees; the splendid old silver firs, with bent and twisted branches, standing here as a back ground for graceful quivering aspens; and there, standing out alone upon some knoll, and serving as a landmark for so many miles.

There was a long lake in the hollow of the park, and the deer park ended on one side of it. On the still evenings their hoarse call, and the occasional collision of two having a free fight with their horns apparently locked together, then disentangling themselves and again clashing together, were familiar sounds.

The upper end of the lake was very carefully preserved as a breeding-place for wild-fowl and herds of every description. Even the woods that fringed the high banks on either side of the water were left untouched. Honeysuckle threw strong suckers across from bough to bough, and hung in long festoons, filling the air with fragrance. Brambles clambered and climbed in tangled masses; and everywhere in these open spaces—caused by a fallen tree—wild flowers in spring and tall flowering grasses in summer, gave an additional charm to the spot. It was a paradise for singing birds and for all wild things. The avenue wound along a height, and

there were vistas of all this natural beauty, and of the lake, and, looking down upon it, one took in something of the charm of a primeval forest if in miniature.

By degrees the road descended and wound along the lake, and a very old-fashioned bridge which led directly up to the house, at times apparently being close to it, and then turning to avoid some splendid specimen of oak—in its whole length of three miles taking advantage of every beautiful bit of distant landscape, skilfully planned to this end.

Mrs. Burlington, whose life had not shown her many of the beautiful English houses, was very much impressed by the large and wide parks and by the well-kept look of everything. For upwards of a mile the turf on both sides of the drive was kept like a lawn. Behind an invisible fence masses of rhododendron and flowering shrubs broke the monotonous lines of the tall trees and open spaces, and allowed the eye to wander over a great extent

of ground, stretching from the well-timbered park and its lake across a wide valley dotted with houses and trees, and ending in a long blue line which indicated the beginning of the great Welsh hills.

The kind host was on the terrace in front of the house to welcome the Burlingtons, and Maria acknowledged to herself that in his chivalric greeting a very real welcome was given.

She was at her best as she smiled her appreciation, and all would have been well had she not heard with her acute sense of hearing her husband say, in a very low tone, "Thank you!"

A further mystery!

What in the world was her husband so very grateful about? It gave her an uncomfortable sense of not understanding all that was going on around her, and it was perhaps natural that in her present mood she attributed those grateful words to some action taken with regard to Marcia Dorington. The front door was a very old arched doorway, and

had studded double doors and a wide space on either side where rugs and wraps were piled upon massive oak tables. The inner door opened into an old hall, which was used as a billiard-room at one end, and a living room at the other. There were two fireplaces, and the large tables had some beautiful flowers in tall vases on them, books, papers, and all those pleasant signs of a place habitually used.

The wide sofas and deep arm-chairs had a look of very real comfort, and Maria had only time to give a glance of appreciation when the sound of music stopped, and several people came in and shook hands with her.

She was taken possession of by the elder daughters at home, and they were taking her to her room when Sir Henry called out "Hullo! where is tea to be found this afternoon?"

"Here, father. We said a few minutes past five because it gives the Duchess time to get here and

have it comfortably. You do not mind, I hope," said Annie, turning to Mrs. Burlington as they pursued their way, "if you would like it earlier we can have some sent to your room."

"Oh, pray do not think of such a thing," said Maria earnestly. "I am not at all a slave to hours, and, indeed, am a little indifferent to all meals."

"Yet you look perfectly strong," answered Annie. "Do you mean you are never very hungry?"

"If I am immensely interested in a book I forget all about meals," said Mrs. Burlington gravely, a little anxious to impress her young hostess with the fact of her having a claim to intellectual superiority.

"Ah! I understand that," said Annie very cordially all the same. "I am afraid I always feel it virtuous putting off five o'clock tea; yet it is in many ways the pleasantest meal of the day. I like informal things so much." She left her guest to take off her things, and went down to join the others.

Maria's room opened on to a wide landing, and when she was ready she paused for a moment to look down from one of the arches of the gallery running round the hall, and she acknowledged the sight to be very pleasant. There were several women, most of them young, and a few men, who sauntered in evidently from active occupation out of doors. Two girls in riding-habits and Sir Henry and her own husband, who were deep in conversation, stood apart from the others. "Politics, of course," thought Mrs. Burlington. She reflected for a moment whether she would also take up a political line, and she decided that it was the right thing to do. It was evident that here it was a subject of great interest, and she regretted, though only for a moment, that she had not followed it at all; and she was conscious of knowing very little about it. But, with her happy method of arranging everything to her liking, she considered that probably none of the other women knew any more than she did herself, and she felt

confident that at any rate she could talk quite as well upon the subject as any one else.

She joined them all, conscious of being at all events beautifully dressed, and with a very elaborate bit of work in a still more elaborate work-bag in her hands.

She was introduced in a kind and pleasant way to those people nearest her, and in that quiet and indescribable manner achieved only by those accustomed to good society, she was made to feel at home and that she was considered as one of themselves.

She found that the two girls in riding-habits were distant neighbours, and she discovered at once that they were not prepared to be friendly towards her, and that they were only held in check by Miss Beryl's presence.

And yet Maria was in a way more attracted than repelled by them. There was something amusing, if flippant, in their speech, and, while she was quite conscious (in that subtle manner in which one woman knows at once the attitude of another towards her)

that for some reason they wished to be impertinent to her, she imagined that she could easily win them, and that only their imperfect acquaintance with her made them antagonistic.

Miss Beryl was called by Sir Henry, who was still talking earnestly to Cyril Burlington, to settle some date for him, and one of the Miss Renshaws immediately placed herself close to Maria, who made a little room for her by way of welcome.

"Is that your work, Mrs. Burlington?" asked Cynthia Renshaw, with affected astonishment.

"Yes. It is my company work," she answered, pleasantly.

"I am so surprised. Julia!" calling to her sister; "Mrs. Burlington has got some very elaborate work, and seems able to do it!"

"Dear me, Mrs. Burlington, may I see it?" asked Julia Renshaw, and then, taking an incroyable from her breast-coat pocket, she examined it critically and in silence.

Maria laughed good-temperedly. "Did you think I was so absorbed in politics just now as not to be able to do anything else?" she asked.

"In politics! Oh, dear, no!"

"What then?"

"We were led to believe—we were told that the only thing you could do was to dance."

"Always that wretched dance," thought Mrs. Burlington. Her face flushed, but she answered with perfect self-command, "I certainly danced once when the character I took in our play required it. It was my first appearance and, probably, will be my last. I rather regret having danced at all down here now."

"Do you, really? Well, it is all very surprising to us, is it not, Julia?"

"Yes; we heard such a different story. But why regret it, Mrs. Burlington?"

"Because," said Maria very distinctly, "things that are done in London society every day, and are not thought at all wonderful, are made of absurd

importance in a limited country neighbourhood. The provincial mind appears to be ill-naturedly inclined, and, being ignorant of the world, takes exception to these things. They know no better."

She had raised her voice, and her words were distinctly heard all over the hall. Mr. Burlington drew near, and was vexed to see his wife's excited countenance and sparkling eyes.

The Renshaws observed him approach, and began quickly to talk of the Duchess and other matters. Maria, who was trying to master her annoyance, was a little impressed by their manner of talking of the Duchess.

"She is not pretty, is she?" said Julia Renshaw; "rather a dowdy little woman, I think."

"And has not very much to say for herself," added Cynthia. "She is one of the women who do not know how to make the best of their position."

"We are all very fond of her here," said Miss Beryl. "Father quite swears by her."

"Does he? Well, I never can see her merits. I always think that she and her very great friend, Marcia Dorington, are so well suited to each other. They are quite right to run in couples."

Maria heard and noted; if she was never to meet Marcia Dorington and her curiosity was not to be set at rest, at any rate her great friend was coming, and through her she might learn much.

And Maria was resolved to know everything she considered due to herself. Not for one moment did it occur to her that, if a secret existed, it might belong to another person, and not to her husband; and that he might be in honour bound not to betray it. She had very little time for further reflections, however, as the Duchess arrived, and the welcoming and introductions and the arrival of tea made a pleasant commotion.

Maria's first conscious feeling reflected upon herself. It was a horrible sensation to feel terribly overdressed, and yet the advent of the young Duchess

in the perfection of simplicity and a tweed gown made her hate her own clothes.

Dowdy! plain! a tall, slight figure with irregular features, lovely, soft, brilliant eyes, and a complexion which was clear and bright, and changed with every passing emotion. Something frank, perfectly natural, and perfectly unconscious made the Duchess very charming; there was that element of purity and goodness about her which insensibly raised the tone of those around her. After recovering a little from her shock of feeling, almost for the first time, dissatisfied with herself, Maria had time to be amused at the efforts made by the Renshaws to affect intimacy and friendship with the lady they had been disparaging a few minutes before.

They were met with well-bred politeness, which kept them further off than they liked; and they became quite officious and pressing in their attentions, without succeeding in any way, and after tea they asked for their horses, and rode off evidently discomfited.

A thousand subjects seemed to be of interest to those young women left now to talk together—working guilds, new books, the illness and recovery of mutual friends. All these topics were touched upon, and, though Maria knew very little of these things, she was not allowed to feel herself left out in the cold, but her opinion was asked, and she was referred to as if she was one in thought with them and willing to work with them. The Duke arrived very late from a country meeting, and he was evidently particularly pleased to see Mr. Burlington.

He did not look quite as pleased to find Mrs. Burlington sitting next to his wife, and she rose to greet him, and introduced Cyril's wife with a slight air of *empressement* as if to turn aside any possible awkwardness. Maria, with that acute sense of any adverse feeling towards herself, saw that he looked at her critically and not admiringly. But his manner was courteous enough, and he stood for a moment

or two talking as he had his tea, and he was then taken possession of by his young wife in a way which Mrs. Burlington thought showed an amount of conjugal affection she was unaccustomed to.

She looked on the table for newspapers, and laid hands on two or three she had seen the Duke lay down as he came in, and she went off to her room, resolved that she should study them carefully and replace them when she knew their contents. As a politician and understanding the questions of the day, the Duke would be forced to admire her, and obliged to show his approbation and admiration at the same time. Taking off her dress, and getting her maid to undo her hair, Maria lay down on the sofa in her own room, and began to study the lesson she had set her heart upon learning. She had an excellent memory, and she learned that lesson very thoroughly.

CHAPTER XVI.

A GREAT MISTAKE.

MRS. BURLINGTON'S maid was much exercised in her mind as to what was the reason of a new whim of her lady's. She had gone to Crabbrook Hall with the usual supply of dresses, and had herself selected and named them with due thoughtfulness. That evening she had decided to wear a white satin, and with it a collar of diamonds and sapphires, beautiful family jewels, which her husband had had reset for her. The gown was a very becoming one, and made quite in the latest fashion, and until now Mrs. Burlington had openly admired it, and had

been specially pleased with her own appearance when she had worn it.

It was lying on the bed now; her jewel-case was ready to be unlocked; and all the little essentials for her toilette were ready also.

But Mrs. Burlington surveyed everything with great discontent, and, with some irritation, begged that that gown and all its accessories might at once be put away.

"What will you wear, ma'am?" asked the surprised Horton.

"Something simpler, plainer."

"There is a large dinner to meet their Graces."

"That does not matter. Have you that half-high white muslin?"

"Your everyday dress, ma'am?"

"Since I wear a teagown most days, you can hardly call it my everyday dress."

Horton was mute. She put the satin gown away, and, with great mortification, took out the

white muslin—a pretty simple affair such as a young lady not yet out might have worn with approbation. Her hair was simply done, and this dress was without one single jewel. Maria and her husband went downstairs.

The unobservant man never noticed his wife's dress, and they joined the party in the room next the dining-room, where few lights obtained, and in the comparatively dim light no one's dress could be much seen.

The Duke and Duchess were not down yet; but just as the music of the bells announced dinner, and the folding-doors leading into the dining-room were thrown back, displaying a brilliantly-lit room and a beautifully decorated table, the Duchess entered, followed by her husband. The Duchess had paid her hosts the compliment of being most beautifully dressed. She had on some soft glittering stuff that clung in graceful folds round her slim figure, and she had diamond stars and large single

diamonds among her hair. One splendid heart was suspended round her throat by a very small diamond riviére. Her dress was half high, and an Elizabethan collar stood up behind her head, and, framed it in a very becoming fashion.

Maria was most excessively annoyed. How was she to follow such caprices as these? That afternoon a tailor-made tweed without even a button in sight. In the evening a figure so brilliant that she was hopelessly beyond everyone else. Maria mentally anathematised her own stupidity, and wished with all her heart that she had kept to her first intention regarding her dress.

She was so discomfited that she was a very distinct disappointment to the man who had been told off to take her in, and who heard a good deal about her brilliancy and her somewhat caustic tongue. She was subdued, very quiet, and not at all herself, answered at random, and spoiled his two best stories by laughing in the wrong place.

Brilliant! He came to the conclusion after his fish, that she was awkward and shy; by the end of the third course he thought her disagreeable, and by the time dinner was over made a mental note against her. Never again would he willingly waste an evening by her side!

After dinner she sat down a little apart from the others, and Miss Beryl, afraid that she was unwell, went and sat down beside her. Maria was so much put out by having done the wrong thing that she could not even try to speak as usual.

Conversation languished in these circumstances, but Miss Beryl gallantly persevered, and her manner was so kind and so encouraging that at length she provoked a confidence. "Is the Duchess capricious?" asked Maria, in a low voice.

"Oh, dear, no! What makes you think so?"

"Her gown when she arrived and her gown now."

"I am afraid I do not quite understand you."

And Miss Beryl made a movement as if to go.

Confidences in a low voice about a friend in that friend's presence were the very last thing she liked.

"Why did she wear such a very plain dress when she arrived that I felt overdressed? And now she has gone to the other extreme."

Poor Miss Beryl was nonplussed. She very nearly laughed outright.

"The Duchess dresses suitably, I suppose. In a railway carriage, with a long drive at each end, of course a travelling dress is right. We are always fond of seeing her pretty jewels—father especially—and she always dresses (most kindly!) to please him when she is with us."

Her voice had a certain quiver in it, and Maria got hot and uncomfortable. This very simple statement made her feel such a fool!

Miss Beryl left her, and went to attend to something her father was saying as he and the other gentlemen all came into the room.

Seeing her seated alone, her husband went up to

her, and was distressed to find her in a depressed and irritable mood. He had no clue to her discomfiture, and was afraid that someone had annoyed her. But, as his efforts seemed to make things worse, he left her after a time, and returned to talk to young Beryl, with whom he had been discussing matter of county business. Suddenly Maria threw off her depression. She had come to the conclusion that she would not allow a stupid mistake to put her at a disadvantage. She joined the others, and somewhat surprised everyone by her ease of manner and her somewhat daring sallies.

The Duke, who always liked bandying words with a pretty woman, was very soon having what he considered a good game, and a war of words went on which amused the bystanders a good deal. Through it all, however, Maria's aim and object were, if possible, to make the Duchess a little uncomfortable. She had been the innocent cause of

putting her in the wrong, and of destroying her self-complacency; if possible, she must make her feel it. None of the bystanders saw anything but pure fun in the whole thing, except Cyril; and, whether it was a presentiment or some feeling he could not explain, he listened with very real annoyance and a vague dread of he knew not what.

“Ah!” at last exclaimed his Grace laughing, “I shall have to give in. I shall have to cry ‘Peccavi,’ and I shall wait to conclude the battle till Marcia Dorington is beside me. If she were here, you would have to look to your weapons.”

“If she were here! Your Grace well knows that ‘here’ is the very last place she would come to—the last place where she would be asked just now.” The words were heard clear and sharp all over the room, and the most terrible silence reigned. As if still more unfortunately to point them, Maria, somewhat startled by the silence, raised her eyes, and met young Mr. Beryl’s fixed upon her with a

look so full of passionate reproach that she gazed spellbound at his face.

The Duchess, who was near the pianoforte, began to play something with fingers that trembled a little, and under the cover of her music conversation in a very limp fashion began again. But the evening was spoiled for everyone, and full of uneasiness, more thoroughly unhappy than she had yet been, Maria looked round for her husband—he had disappeared.

Maria was still more conscious of having said the wrong thing when every one went to bed. Only Miss Beryl touched her hand coldly and said "Good-night." Almost every other woman bowed very stiffly, and did not speak.

Dismissing her maid, Maria sat down in a sort of stupor of surprise. What had she done? What was there in her speech that had caused such a movement of direct antagonism towards her?

She fell asleep at last, and when she woke she

was still in her armchair and the fire was out. She looked at her watch; it was nearly three, and Cyril had not come up.

She crept into bed and fell asleep, and slept late into the next morning. When her maid brought her early cup of tea there was a note from her husband.

They must go home at once. Indeed, he had gone, and she had better leave before anyone was up. He offered no explanations, and Maria was quite bewildered. Go! just as she was making friends with everyone. It was so provoking. Go! without saying good-bye to anyone. What in the world was the meaning of it all?

Maria did not want courage. She resolved that she should see Sir Henry at any rate, and she wrote him a little note, begging him to see her. But she was much discomfited by having her note brought back. Sir Henry was out riding. He always rode early, and he would not be in for some time. He never returned till breakfast was ready. The

carriage was ordered at nine for her. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to leave; and as Maria got into the carriage and drove past the deep and beautiful lake and all else she had conviction, perhaps for the first time in all her life, that she had, from the beginning of her visit to the end of it, made herself in some way ridiculous.

She arrived to find herself expected at home. She was afraid of going out, and in so doing missing Cyril, and she was burning with anxiety to have an explanation.

She could settle to nothing. She wandered from one room to another restlessly and aimlessly, and never had a day seemed so long. It was late when he returned. Maria had never realised what his anger would be like, and she hardly knew him now—the stern, severe expression, the ringing contempt in his voice. Her attempt at justification died upon her lips.

“Where did you get hold of that story?” he asked at length.

"About Marcia Dorington?"

He bowed his head.

"Lady Rhodes said something . . . I guessed the rest. Cyril, why should you be so very angry? It was only fun!"

Cyril's face was a perfect study. There were anger and bitter contempt through it all, and the profoundest astonishment.

Was it possible that his wife—his wife—could risk wounding anyone's feelings, and see no wrong in handling a private matter, and showing it up before everyone as a jest?

What he might have said or done, no one can say, because even his angry eyes perceived that his wife looked ill, and the bewilderment in her face and her sudden pallor softened him a little.

After all, if she was absolutely destitute of delicacy of feeling, if, in order to create a moment's laughter, she did not hesitate to put honour and every consideration upon one side, was it not because

of some want in her nature for which she could not be severely blamed?

"You are ill," he said; "shall I call some one?"

"I am ill," she said; "I feel very odd. I am not accustomed to illness."

Her words came slowly from her lips, and he rang for her maid, and summoned Mrs. Butt, whose experience might be of use. Before next morning dawned Cyril had been told at the same moment that there had been certain hopes, and that they were extinguished. His wife was very ill.

CHAPTER XVII.

FARTHER MISTAKES.

NO position could well be more trying than the one in which Cyril Burlington found himself at this time. All his kinder and gentler thoughts were enlisted on his wife's behalf on account of her real illness and sufferings, such as he had never realised before. But between him and the friend who was the dearest and best friend he had on earth lay a shadow now, and it was impossible to see how it could ever be lifted.

All that had passed regarding Marcia Dorington had been to him absolutely sacred. Few words had passed between the two men about her.

Even when his interference had been made known to Charlie Beryl, their friendship had stood the test. There had been a hard grasp of the hand as Cyril had acknowledged his act. "She did not know—and I told her," he had said, and after a conflict with himself poor Charlie had said in a hoarse voice, "You have done right." From that hour their friendship had been greater even than before, each man respecting the other for the way in which all had been done. Now in some way the story had come to his wife's ears, and she had used her knowledge very cruelly. How was Mr. Burlington to know that the story insinuated by Lady Rhodes referred to his supposed admiration, and that his wife had merely wished to annoy the Duchess by putting her great friend in the position of a slighted being? How could he justify himself to his friend; what assurance was possible? Even to touch upon the subject seemed to him impossible, and after all *qui s'excuse s'accuse.*

He thought very bitterly of it all, and running through all was the natural grief about his wife's illness and their mutual loss. He was conscious that there was very much that he failed to comprehend in his wife's character. There was to him such a curious mixture of daring and ignorance that he never knew what she was likely to say or do next, or how she would take anything. The last act of hers set them farther apart than they had yet been. It was cruel and it was unwomanly. A young wife capable of such an act must have, he feared, a bad heart. . There was, indeed, a sense of outrage just now that made justice impossible for him in her direction.

Had he been able to talk it over with Aunt Anne! But that was not possible. He must bear his burden, and make no sign. He must bear the stigma of having put his friend's secret at the mercy of an indiscreet woman, and take no means to clear his honour. He was, however, thankful

that the sudden and unexpected return from a visit they were expected to prolong was so naturally accounted for. Maria's illness accounted for everything, and saved all sorts of explanations. Aunt Anne lost no time in arriving to inquire and to sympathise.

It was not for some days that she was allowed to see Maria, and she was grieved to notice how completely she seemed to have lost her spirits. Her loss was sad, but to an affectionate and shrewd observer like Aunt Anne there seemed something else. And in the short sentences she uttered there was a tone of hopelessness which she could not account for. As time went on, and the marked improvement brought permission to go to the boudoir, and then to resume all the habits of complete health, there was a strange disinclination to avail herself of the permission.

She also seemed curiously anxious never to be alone with Cyril, and poor Aunt Anne came to the

conclusion that the various phases of temper so characteristic of the present day were utterly beyond her. One good thing, however, resulted. Maria was more drawn towards her and was kinder and more thoughtful about her and her comforts than she had yet shown herself. She was frequently tempted to dine with them, and it was on one of these occasions that the elder woman received farther enlightenment.

"Now that you are strong and well again, you will, I am sure, begin to help Cyril about his election. I feel that no more time must be lost."

"I have given up all idea of standing for this division of the country," said Cyril, shortly.

"What do you mean?" Aunt Anne was so intensely surprised that she gazed at him in quite a comical fashion.

Cyril laughed uneasily. "I do not intend trying to get elected for anything. I have made up my mind to give it up."

"Is this news to you, or did you know it?" asked Aunt Anne, turning to Maria.

But Maria's expression of supreme astonishment answered for her.

"It will be a very great disappointment to Sir Henry Beryl, to Charlie, and to all your friends."

"Will it?"

His cynical and bitter tone surprised her. His wife's face still showed nothing save intense surprise. What did this all mean?

"Cyril," she said, gravely, "it is a new thing for you to speak of your friends bitterly, and it is a new thing for you to have some annoyance you cannot speak out. But never mind me, dear! Now you have a wife who is, I am glad to know, anxious to be one with you in everything, I no longer expect all your confidence. One thing, dear," the old lady said bravely, "I am quite sure all you do is from a good motive, and that if you withhold your confidence it is because you feel it right to do so."

Cyril reddened. How could he do what he longed to do—tell her everything? How explain the cruel position in which his wife had placed him? Silence was his safest course. There is no doubt that all these troubles—which weighed so terribly upon him—did not tend to make him an agreeable companion.

Maria bore with him in silence. And it increased his strong disapprobation that she apparently cared so little for all the trouble she had brought upon him. For, though she had fretted over her loss a good deal at first, and had been annoyed and bewildered by the position of being, as it were, in disgrace, her buoyant nature helped her to reassert herself, and her sense of being unjustly treated roused all her spirit, and made her once more assert herself, once more let her laugh be heard, and, above all, hide from the husband who was so unjust how deeply his conduct affected her.

One sentence might have saved all this misunder-

standing. Who was to pronounce it? And, in the history of many misunderstandings, is it not too often the case? A few words make a rift, and silence widens it. Had love been there, it might all have been so different. But whatever Cyril thought, whatever he intended, the matter was in a great measure taken out of his hands. He was essentially a man in whom other men believed. He was recognised as an able man, a good speaker, and he was essentially a politician and not a partisan, and he was soon obliged to yield to the various requisitions sent to him. He *must* stand, and he was forced to withdraw his resignation and his excuses.

Maria was thankful simply because it would occupy him, and that in some very bewildering way he allowed her to feel that the complication was her doing.

And it gave her an opportunity for exerting herself which her natural energy longed for. At

any rate, now she had an opening, and she would be able to prove her ability. At Crabbrook Hall she had carefully studied those papers, and she knew their arguments by heart. She had been a good deal surprised to find how completely she must have misunderstood the political principles and ideas of her husband and his party, since here those very principles were ridiculed, and any possible merit attaching to actions taken by that party was carefully explained away. Virulent abuse of the Government, sarcastic remarks, and all the license of party warfare were given.

Maria was surprised at first, and then the clever way in which shallow arguments were handled pleased her; and, without asking her husband what all this meant, knowing indeed so little of the subject as to be ignorant of the real principles supported by her husband, she never took in that those papers had been purposely taken to Crabbrook in order to show the line of argument the party had

to defend themselves against, so as to have their answers ready.

She read various leading articles, felt she knew everything now, and that she had mastered the whole subject. She was only longing for her opportunity, and at last that opportunity came. Mr. Bathurst, a prominent man, particularly noted for his satire, pungent wit, and a vein of suspicion which prevented his having many intimate friends, was staying in the neighbourhood with his wife.

It was suggested to Cyril that it would be a golden opportunity. Two undecided neighbours, who were "halting between two opinions," might be completely won over to their side if, in an informal way, they had an opportunity given them of hearing Mr. Bathurst in private life, and of being brought under his influence. It may be said that Cyril would far rather have had a man's party. He had grown to dread the line his wife might take on any occasion. The misunderstanding be-

tween them had not yet been cleared up, and every time he reflected upon that scene at Crabbrook Hall the less he felt that he understood her. There were some bitter moments when he thought she had purposely been malicious, though he tried very honestly to forget it, and to take the most charitable view of her conduct.

Now, however, he had plunged once more into the political sea, and he was a good deal away from home, glad to be forced to think of other things, and especially to forget his mortification. He was too tired to discuss politics with his wife when he got home, and, besides, he knew that her interest in the whole matter meant simply—a house in London, or not.

No man is always alive to or quite understands the forces which drive a woman into action. Cyril knew less than many men.

He did a supremely unwise thing. Looking vaguely before him, and not at all at her, he said,

"You had better not talk much. Your acquaintance with politics is rather superficial. The men coming will have a good deal to say. It will be much better if you will listen."

"I understand Mrs. Bathurst to be a great talker. I wonder whether her husband has been so polite as to order her to hold her tongue?"

Cyril did not answer at once. Her air was one of deep offence, and he was vexed with himself for having annoyed her.

"I am afraid I put it rather strongly."

"You put it very strongly."

"Forgive me, Maria; I wish you to be at your best."

"And to be dumb."

"You know that is not my meaning." Already his penitence was fading. "Your acquaintance with politics *is* superficial; if you were drawn out on the subject you might make a mistake."

"I might, certainly."

This was all that passed. Was it in nature (a

woman's nature) not to try to prove him wrong?

Aunt Anne could not join them. She suffered from rheumatism, and seldom went out in the evening at that time. There was no doubt that when Maria appeared, being a little late, the guests were much impressed. She was in a becoming gown, and made her apologies with much grace. Mr. Bathurst took her into dinner, and the party sat comfortably round a table, which being circular, prevented anything like a *tête-à-tête* and is always more sociable.

The lights and flowers and all else were a success. Mrs. Butt outdid herself. Political men are not more insensible than their fellows to the charm of an undeniable repast which they have well earned. All went well at first, and Mr. Burlington was lulled into security. The waverers were evidently much impressed by Mr. Bathurst's sallies. With a gesture peculiar to himself, he dismissed objections, and covered arguments with ridicule. Laughter

became general, and the waverers laughed with him. Most unfortunately Mrs. Bathurst spoke, and, though she strengthened his hands and said what she had to say wisely enough, it gave Maria the opening she wanted.

Turning to Mr. Bathurst, she began to repeat the arguments she had cherished, and, with a heightened colour and very brilliant and sparkling eyes, she alluded to the one or two mistakes he himself had committed; she forgot nothing, and she covered her unfortunate husband with confusion and the party with dismay.

"Where in the world did you pick up all this nonsense?" asked Cyril, vexed beyond expression.

"At Crabbrook Hall."

Mr. Bathurst looked significantly at his wife. The other men looked at each other. Cyril hardly knew what to say—how explain it all.

"I can tell you a great many more things that were done," continued Maria in a tone of triumph, quite delighted at have made a sensation.

"Perhaps you will kindly quote chapter and verse at a more opportune moment," said her husband, and she was forced to take the hint, and retire to the drawing-room with Mrs. Bathurst.

"I understood, Mrs. Burlington, that your husband belonged to our party," said Mrs. Bathurst, who was simply furious at her husband's shortcomings having been quoted to his face. "Of course, as we are mistaken in his views, he cannot expect any support from us, or any other others of our side."

Maria was quite surprised at this indignant voice. She said, naively:

"Do you think these questions matter really? They do to argue about. I can argue as well as anyone, but I don't really care; do you mean to say you do?"

Mrs. Bathurst looked at her with unfeigned amazement. "I suppose, if you have no political principles, your husband at any rate has some?"

"I really do not think he has," said Maria, with a brilliant smile. "I think he tries to interest himself in it all, and I do not know why. He speaks well, but I do not think he is really interested in politics; and at home, to me he never says one single word about them. He very much dislikes political women; he thinks them odious."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Bathurst.

She took up a book and examined it closely. Maria had made an enemy of her at one stroke.

A political woman! Of course, he had referred to her. Mrs. Bathurst could joyfully at that moment have smothered him and his wife at the same time.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ACCIDENT.

MR. BURLINGTON by nature was not a patient man. His wife's extraordinary outburst had filled him with righteous anger. At every turn he felt confronted by a force absolutely new to him; and was he to have his friends alienated, his life spoiled, by her? What lay before him? How could he make her see the havoc she was making; how, in short, show her her mistakes?

At the end of these bitter reflections came another: what proof had she ever given him of that affection for himself he had been assured was

making her unhappy and robbing her of rest and sleep? For Mrs. Kingson had laid on the colours very thickly, knowing well that if she spoke at all it must be strongly. Mr. Burlington was not a man ready to suppose in the exaggeration or untruth of anyone; and, with all the modesty of a man who had lived apart from other men, he did not see that there was any reason why any pressure should have been used. When he had been told in perfectly plain English that the girl loved him he had felt grateful to her, and had regarded her with much interest. He wanted to marry, and he admired Maria for the possession of those qualities he was himself deficient in. He was so conscious of deficiencies that he had counted her caring for him as a great merit. So brilliant and handsome a girl! His sense of his own deficiencies had prevented his taking exception to the way in which a painful story had been told him. It was told so late that he could not draw back with

honour, and a natural indignation had been his first impression. "I should have been told this; I ought to have known it before."

"We thought, of course, you knew it, being in the neighbourhood." Mrs. Kingson had said this with pained surprise visible on her handsome face. Then she had added, with emotion, "Will it make a difference?"

He felt that, if it did, no one could blame him; but he had got accustomed to Maria and to her ways; he admired her, and he said to himself that he had perhaps outlived the age of romance. He was also not destitute of that chivalrous feeling that lies, happily, in the nature of most good men. If she loved him now, one day when she came to know how he had acted, would she not love him still more? And he did not in the least believe that secrets of any description could remain secrets for all time. At any rate, he would shield her from all disagreeables; as his wife he would honestly care for her happiness.

It seemed strange now to look back and see how mistaken he had been in his ideas. If the affection existed, it was never shown ; his presence or his absence seemed alike a matter of indifference to her. She had her own pursuits, and never expected him to interest himself in what she was doing, and she certainly never betrayed any interest in his going or coming, or in any of his occupations. They were drifting farther apart instead of becoming more intimate.

He would have felt quite hopeless had it not been for one circumstance which came to his memory, and which caused him to think that he did not altogether comprehend her. Riding together, they had been delayed for a moment at one of the lodges—one seldom used, as it led to the woods only and to no public road. It was opposite one of the lodge gates of Wyncote Hundred. Coming hurriedly to open it, the young woman had a very young baby held close to her bosom, and, imagin-

ing as they passed that his wife said something, he looked at her. She was very pale, and her large dark eyes had tears in them; he was surprised, but in a moment she had given her horse its head, and was going so swiftly up the avenue that he could not see her face again; and as she laughed merrily at some antics going on between the dogs, as he joined her at the front door, he fancied that he must have been mistaken. And yet the impression returned to him, and gave him a vague hope. If children were given to them, would it not alter her and soften her?

It was, therefore, not so much as a stern judge that he went to find his wife next day; it was more as one anxious to argue kindly and convincingly with her. But it was unfortunate for him and for his present wishes that when he was grave he looked decidedly stern, and his wife had grown to dread this expression, and to resent it.

“May I ask you why you talked so much non-

sense to Mr. Bathurst last night?" He sat down by her work-table, and took up an ivory paper-cutter as he spoke.

"You may ask anything you like," she said, in a tone which sounded indifferent.

"Which means that you will not answer?"

"You are such a very clever man, no interpretation is necessary. You read my thoughts so clearly."

"Maria," he said, trying to suppress his annoyance, "you are my wife, and we should act together in all great questions. Why should you pain and mortify me by quoting all that absurd nonsense to the very people who would dislike and be offended by those sentiments?"

"Cyril," she said slowly, "if you choose to misunderstand me, you can do so. I am not a puppet. I have a right to form my own opinions, and to proclaim them. Why should I see everything just as you see it? Why should I be silent, or speak according to your orders?"

"My wish for your silence is simply that, when a woman talks on a subject she knows nothing about, she puts herself in a very ridiculous position."

"Mr. Bathurst thought me very amusing; he did not think me ridiculous."

"He covered his annoyance because he is a well-bred man. I believe that in one way it will be a greater disappointment to you than to me. But I have had a note from him advising me to withdraw from the election. He is quite satisfied that my chances are nil."

Maria bit her lip. It was a disappointment to her; but she would not say so.

"I suppose your chances were never very great, and now Mr. Bathurst makes an excuse, and it gives you another handle against me. I do not believe I have anything to do with it."

It must be owned that this was trying.

"Of course," said her husband, "if you are quite

determined not to see that you are in the wrong, there is no use in continuing the argument."

Maria said nothing. She was very unhappy that morning, and, without analysing her unhappiness, she blamed her husband's wants of appreciation for it.

"There is one thing I want to say, Maria, and I want you to take it to heart. You pride yourself on your absolute truthfulness. Until now I have given you credit for being perfectly truthful. Does it not occur to you that in conveying a false impression you are not being truthful?"

Maria crimsoned.

"You conveyed a very false and, I may add, a very unfair impression about me—about my views—last night."

"I gave my own, not yours."

"Do you suppose that those men believe that? Do you fancy they do not think that you adopt my private convictions on political questions? You are young, and wives, as a rule, do not parade differences

of opinion in public, and to their husbands' hurt. And if it was the truth . . . but you know that these questions never interest you; you know nothing about them; you care less. For the sake of making a sensation, you quoted papers you had got hold of, and, I repeat, you untruthfully and purposely gave a false impression, and have stopped my political career."

"Do you care?" asked his wife, looking up at him. "You never give me the impression of really caring; that is what I never understand; it is all talk, and to say brilliant things that sound well. It is quite impossible that men should be in real earnest about the trifles they spend hours in talking about?"

That feeling of complete hopelessness once more came to Cyril Burlington. How was he to put things before his wife to make her sensible of her folly? Did she believe in no earnestness about anything? Was she so superficial that she could not realise any depth of conviction on any subject? He went

slowly out of the room. Maria matched her silks, and her fingers still handled them, but rather absently.

She had, according to him, done harm; but she did not credit it. She always resented the way in which he criticised and never approved her actions, and she asked herself was this what she had married for. She was very far from realising her dream of occupying a sort of pedestal and being a central power. All she did was put before her as something she ought not to have done. It may be said that from first to last her happiness, her influence, her theories, alone occupied her. Her husband's happiness, his wishes, his welfare, never for one single second came into her mind.

She had married to carry out a plan of life towards which end a husband was necessary, and she felt aggrieved and injured because his influence was all against her success. Was she to see all her hopes extinguished because her husband failed to appreciate her?

He did not come in to luncheon, and, anxious to do anything to dispel the uncomfortable feelings she was possessed by, she ordered her horse, requested to go alone, and, once mounted, went swiftly across the grass, delighting in the freshness of her horse and the sense of absolute freedom once more.

The park surrounding Burlington House was well laid out, and was spacious for the size of the property. But Maria's mood was against every restriction that day, and even the few miles which enclosed it she felt a restriction. She rode up to the lodge before mentioned, and passed into the woods beyond. For some reason, only once or twice had she and her husband ridden there, and now she determined to explore them thoroughly. It would be breaking new ground, as when she had been there before they had used a short cut homewards, and never gone far into the interior.

It was delightful riding on the soft ground, treading upon a layer of last year's pine needles,

and meeting no one. To her perturbed spirit the solitude brought calm and peace. What a happy thought it had been coming here to-day. The hasty passing of the birds from bough to bough, the sweet fragrant scents around her, the vistas here and there of blue distances, and the murmur of the faint west wind whispering its secrets to the topmost branches, that rose more ambitiously than the others, soothed her!

Almost for the first time a curious regret came to her. Almost for the first time she asked herself why she had missed love. It seemed so strange to her that she should never have been in love with anyone; it was a want in her life, and at that moment she regretted it deeply. "If I was the least in love with Cyril, how much easier my life would be!" she said to herself; and then she laughed. It seemed so odd that the thought should come to her now for the very first time. She rode on over some crackling twigs, reining in her horse—partly

because she wanted to think, partly because, as usual in all those paths, there were many slippery places—and she sent him along at a foot pace now. She was lulled into security by the monotony of her way, and was sitting rather carelessly holding her reins, without any thought of possible catastrophe, when a shot, fired apparently quite close to her, startled her horse tremendously.

He plunged so violently that it was all she could do to sit him, and, while trying to pat him and quiet him, his hind legs slipped away under him, and he fell throwing her clear, and at some little distance, but, unfortunately, against a tree. She felt as if many more shots had been fired close to her eyes, and then she knew nothing more.

At a little distance, close to a turning-point in the pathway, a man came running up at full speed in great alarm. He put down his gun, and ran up to her; looked round for water, which was not far off, and bathed her forehead and eyes till she recovered.

Maria was much stunned, and quite confused. She hardly knew what had happened, or how she came there, and her first conscious thought was about her horse.

"Your horse is close by, quite as much frightened as you were. I am so sorry! Only I did not, of course, know that any one was there."

The voice was pleasant and refined, and as Maria began to recover her faculties she saw that the speaker was a gentleman, and one of the handsomest men she had ever seen.

"What will you do?" asked the stranger, anxiously. "The house is perhaps a little far." He spoke with great hesitation.

"May I ask who you are?"

"O, one of the Wyncotes. I know you; you are young Mrs. Burlington. I was standing near you after that meeting—a man was impertinent—I felt inclined to knock him down."

"Did you?" Maria's faculties were still numb; but she thought it very nice of this man to wish

to knock down another because of impertinence directed towards herself.

"I must go home now," she said, after a bit.

"I suppose you must," he said, with regret in his voice. "You are sure you are able to ride home?"

"Quite sure, thank you very much; you have been very kind."

He mounted her well, and accompanied her a little way. Then he turned round, held out his hand and said good-bye, detaining her a moment or two under pretence of arranging her habit, but evidently anxious to say something he found difficult.

Then it came. Speaking with affected carelessness, he said. "We are on such distant terms with Mr. Burlington—perhaps—I think it would be better not to say you had met me Mrs. Burlington."

"Why?" she asked, in great surprise.

"O, nothing—an old awkwardness. Of course, it is as you please."

He lifted his shooting cap, and turned away at once. Maria, feeling much shaken, bruised, and stiff all over, went home slowly. She had a very real headache when she got home, and went to bed at once. When Cyril came to see her, hearing that she had had an accident, she told him at once what had happened without naming the man who had helped her to recover.

"Have you any idea who he was?" asked Cyril, a vague idea of reward passing through his mind.

"Yes; I asked his name. He was one of the Wyncotes."

She saw her husband start, and in a moment or two he left her to the repose she needed.

CHAPTER XIX.

AUNT ANNE SPEAKS HER MIND.

AUNT ANNE came up that evening and went to see Maria, who was suffering a good deal, but who made light of her sufferings. She was evidently glad to see her visitor, who was always kind, and who, being one of the few women in the world able to overcome a prejudice, had come to see that, with a great deal of absurdity and much that was irritating, there lay a fund of goodness at heart, and that Maria had some fine, even noble, qualities if she only allowed them fair play.

Maria was too unwell to talk, but there was no mistaking her appreciation of those acts of thought-

fulness which added to her comfort, and which affection knows so exactly how to give.

The moving of the lights, the arrangements about the small fire, which the chilly evenings made pleasant; the bunch of fragrant roses brought from her own garden, the kind and gentle hand on her forehead, filled Mrs. Burlington with that sense of being really cared for which is so indescribably soothing in suffering.

Cyril looked so grave when Aunt Anne joined him in the library that she was afraid his wife was more severely hurt than she had believed; but he soon undeceived her. It seemed hard while his wife was lying ill to tell of the fiasco she had caused, and he offered no explanation, and did not say a word to connect his wife with his disappointment. He was a little startled when Aunt Anne used the very words his wife had done.

"Do you care?" she asked, a little surprised at a certain bitterness in his tone.

He gave a short laugh.

"I suppose success is pleasant to us all."

"I always imagined that being tied for a certain number of months, and having to give up so much time, would be quite contrary to your inclinations."

"And why, then, did I take it up?"

"From a sense of duty, patriotism. I thought you had been talked into it."

"I have nothing else. I am not cut out for the rôle of a married man. I married too late."

His voice was vibrating with some feeling he was trying to master.

Aunt Anne was quite devoted to him, and his words pained and surprised her. She did not hear them unmoved, and she began to see that he was unhappy beyond any anxiety about his wife.

But it has been well said that a sorrow, even a bitter grief, has more chance of dying if it has not taken the form of words, even when uttered only to one faithful friend. Her wish was to receive his

confidence and to try to put things right—and she saw that he was longing to give her that confidence—but her sense of right made her prevent it. She turned quickly to the matter of the fall, and asked where and how it had happened. Cyril was wounded at first. Was it possible that he had lost that close sympathy which had helped him all his life? Then his integrity made him glad that, on the subject of his wife, this should be the case. Would not any confidence on that subject take the form of a complaint? Regarding his wife's fall, it was, of course, different, and here her sympathy was ready, and her annoyance equal to his.

“It is fate! Is it fate?” Cyril said, slowly, asserting and questioning in one breath.

“It has come, but it had to come. After all, my dearest Cyril, it may have no consequences.”

Cyril looked incredulous. Aunt Anne did not know his wife as well as he did. If she wished to pursue the acquaintance, if her curiosity were aroused,

no words of his would prevent her from doing so. Already he had seen an eagerness, an anxiety to know why this nearest of all the neighbours was the one who had never called, and why there was no sort of intercourse with them.

All around them there seemed to be friendliness, and yet she and Cyril never met these neighbours. They were never present at any of the various entertainments to which she was asked, and she heard of them everywhere, generally by accident. One very remarkable fact was the way in which, by common consent, the subject was dropped whenever she was there. Aunt Anne was looking very thoughtfully at the fire, and then the result of her cogitation came out.

“I would tell her everything, Cyril.”

Cyril started. “You do not know her; it is quite impossible.”

“I have studied your wife. I have grown to like her; and I think she is being very unfairly used.”

Cyril was so surprised by this sudden attack that

he simply gazed at her in supreme astonishment.

"You expect her to shut her eyes to what goes on. You know you have done a very generous thing. But she does not know it."

"And if she did know, she would hate me for it, Aunt Anne. We may have been wrong, but I was in the hands of others. Now it is too late!"

Aunt Anne could say no more. She did, however, reiterate her words, and she added a warning.

"She is in a false position, and it is unfair. If one day she takes some step we may all regret—I do not say she will, but if she does, can those who kept her in ignorance be held blameless? Only her affection for you may save her at such a time."

Cyril heard her quietly; but her words sounded to him as mockery.

"Her affection for you." Each day convinced him that she had no such affection. Mrs. Kingson had very much to answer for.



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